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Claims Conference
Conference on Jewish Material Claims
Against Germany

Claims Conference Holocaust Survivor Memoir Collection

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The four leaved clover

A few days ago I decided to tidy up somewhat the little room, which is my study. There is a desk with an old typewriter on it which I use to do my writing, when I succeed in overcoming my laziness, there are shelves up to the ceiling filled with books, hundreds of other books for which there was no room on the shelves, lie on the floor with bundles of old manuscripts – drafts of the books, which were never written, newspaper-clippings and other documents which I set aside for later use...and have forgotten about completely. While tidying up, I found a small piece of marble which I picked up at one of the ancient Greek sanctuaries in Delphi and a roll of material with pictures of the Blue Glum, the Desert Rose, the Cooktown Orchid and the Waratah which I brought from Australia. Judith, the slim girl, with whom I toured Greece, I met a few years ago: she had become a stout lady with a gentle moustache and she commandeered her elderly husband who seemed to have Parkinson's-disease. Liana, my companion in Australia, I have not seen since she married a brain-surgeon and left for the USA. She remained a slim, blond beauty in my mind.

I was musing about these memories – when quite unexpectedly, I discovered a coin which was hiding among the papers. It was glittering as if were of silver – but in fact, it was just a nickel. A quarter of an old Polish zloty, with the figure 25 on one side – and a clover on the other. One could clearly see that the Polish text was worn away and a clover was engraved on the other side. A clover with four leaves – the emblem of good luck.

It was quite a surprise to find the coin after more than half a century. I thought that I had lost it during the chaotic times of war firms that followed and never hoped to see it again...Now suddenly I remembered every second of those ever-lasting minutes. Our

searching for mines between the German machine guns and the mine-throwers of the Red Army on no man's land. The pandemonium of the retreat....Our unsuccessful attempt to escape...Herskowitz Lejba shot by a German patrol. Then, our miraculous survival of the execution...And ultimately, the six of us, sitting beside a ditch, still with the icy feeling of death which had been so near just a few minutes ago.

Unexpectedly, Dini started laughing. "A shamrock" he cried 'I found a clove with four leaves. We will be lucky!"

"...and we will need it very much I guess"...Reb Bornstein added softly. He was unwillingly involved in the unsuccessful venture to run over to the Russians who – so we hoped – would save us.

"They are just goyim" he said when I told him about my plan "they hate us as much as the Germans. There is just one place to go to – Palestine."

Bornstein's family lived originally in a stetl in the Pale in Russia and from there they fled during the great pogroms in the early nineties of the last century to Galicia which then belonged to the Habsburg Empire. Later on his parents settled at Kisvárdá, a small town in Northeastern Hungary. His grandfather took part in the first Zionist Congress at Basel – Reb Bornstein was an ardent Zionist.

Lejba and Bornstein were the only observant Jews in our group of six – the other four, including myself, belonged to that assimilated species of Jews, which even after a quarter of a century of an anti-Semitic regimes, which with so called "Jewish Laws" deprived them of their human rights, were proud of their "Hungarianness" and thought of Hungary as their homeland.

The idea of running over to the Russians occurred to me while we were searching for mines. It was a risky job, indeed – all the more so because the Hungarian army did not have the magnetic equipment, which make the discovery of a mine much easier. The French – we

heard – used pigs which had a refined sense for objects hidden the earth – perhaps because of a previous training searching for truffles. We had, neither the instruments, nor the special ^{special} sense of the pigs, which could be of some use. Even long sticks were not available, because the front ran along the plain, and there were just a few trees. If you approached a tree, you became an easy target for the Russian sharp shooters.

The first among us to be blown up by a hidden mine was Rosenberg. He was a tiny fellow, almost a dwarf and because of this (and because he was a composer in civil life) he was often the target of cruel jokes of the “keret” – as the gentile soldiers, our guards were called. Before sending him to the no man’s land to search for mines, corporal Horváth ordered him to do some “békaügetés” – frog’s leaps – an exhausting punishment – just because he was caught secretly smoking a cigarette....A mortal offense, because there had been a “hipis” – a kind of body search – the day before during which all valuables including money and cigarettes were taken away. Rosenberg succeeded in hiding some of his cigarettes somehow and the success became fatal for him. He was anyway quite clumsy with his hands – and after the humiliating “Frog’s leap” he was frantic. Immediately, as he started worming his way in no man’s land, we saw trouble ahead. Normally one was crawling, dead slowly – knowing that, in fact, death was hiding everywhere. After a meter or two, one stopped crawling and tried to observe as closely as possible the terrain ahead. While putting down their mines, the Russians were in a hurry and in many cases the hiding of the mines was not perfect. After careful observation one could see some irregularities – traces of hurried digging, some metal part of the mine not covered with earth...After such a discovery you had – or you felt you had – the upper hand. You could approach the mine in relative safety, which was half way to success, the greatest danger was to step on an unsuspected mine, which blew up immediately, of course. If you reached the mine unharmed, there was a fifty per cent chance that you would be able to remove the earth which covered the mine, after which the removal of the detonator

was child's play, supposing you had to know how, you were not too excited...and you were not killed in the meantime by a Russian sharpshooter.

Rosenberg however was too excited. He crawled too fast ahead and he did not stop. Dini tried to warn him, "slowly, look around" he cried but Rosi (as we called him) did not listen – I thought I saw a faint smile on his face as if he knew what would follow – but did not want to do anything to prevent his fate. It was a kind of suicide, I think he was sure that the mine was there in front of him and he wanted to die. He did not guess however how long and cruel his death would be.

A blast was heard and we saw that he must have been wounded in his abdomen. What we could not see was that at the same time both of his eyes were gouged out. Moaning, in utter pain, he lay now motionless on the no man's land.

Alázatosan kérek engedélyt – I humbly beg for permission – Lejba asked the corporal in the prescribed way, to allow him to bring back the bleeding man. With his big moustache and wrinkled peasant face, Horváth was a hard man, but not entirely insensitive. He made a motion with his head, which meant consent. Unfortunately Ensign Szuhay¹ the commander of the squadron arrived unexpectedly. A haggard man with a humped back, he looked older than his years – he was just only in his early fifties. There was a rumor that originally he was a notary at a judicial court but was ousted from his job because of some irregularity. In dire unemployment he arranged somehow to be called up for military service, as he was an officer in reserve. He was appointed commander of a squadron of Jews doing forced labour. Unluckily for us he became the arbiter of our fate...A weak man and an alcoholic, he used every opportunity to prove his power over life and death.

I remember vividly the scene: the endless plain around us, far away the shining ribbon of a river. The muffled sound of the Russian mine throwers sending their missiles from time

¹ Name changed to protect descendants

to time towards us...Because of the scorching heat there was an uncertain vibration in the air, a kind of fata morgana which I had seen many years ago as a young child, traveling on a horse-and-cart with uncle Laci on the Great Hungarian Plain. ..it was like a dream from a fairy tale.

Lejba was just about to creep out of the trench in which we were hiding, when Szuhay appeared.

“Stay where you are!” he shouted at him. Did you get orders to leave your place? The mine is out. There is no point in moving.”

“Alázatosan jelentem – the man there...” Corporal Horváth pointed timidlyRosi...

“You mean the Jew there” Szuhay interrupted coldly “he should stay where he is. “ He took his revolver, aimed at Rosenberg and shot. His body twitched once or twice and then Rosi was motionless.

A few hours after this event, I was ordered to remove a mine about fifty meters from the site of the previous explosion. Szuhay had already gone and Horváth gave Dini permission to come with me. “I need some points” Dini said jokingly, when I asked him why he volunteered. He acted as if he were playing an absurd game, in which the recovered mines were the cards.

With Dini on my side, everything went quite smoothly. He soon discovered the place where the mine might have been buried and without saying a word, showed the way we approach it. When we were there we cleaned the sand away from around the grayish-green metal disk. The detonator was now clearly visible, I made a move to it, but Dini stopped me. “Wait a bit!” he hissed. He took his pocket knife and cautiously cut a hair-thin, almost invisible wire. “An old trick, but they seldom apply it!” he said “now you can go on and it won’t explode”.

It didn't and we survived the day unharmed. But the Hungarian army didn't. The next day a group of us – about six or seven men – were ordered to carry rolls of barbed wire onto a mountain top. The wise commanders of the army planned to establish defence line there, against the forthcoming Russian assault. It was hard work: each roll was carried by two men on a rod and as we climbed up on the steep, untrodden path, the roll slipped down and the guy at the lower end of the rod had to carry the whole weight of the roll and the barbed wire which was also sticking into him cruelly. Sweating and bleeding we reached the summit, there we dropped the rolls and fell down on the ground dead tired. Even the “honvéd” who was our guard on the expedition, sat down on a flat rock to have a rest and remained silent. We wondered why: normally he was constantly shouting and giving orders, just not to let us have any peace.

On the northern side of the mountain there were no trees, just bushes. The view was unhindered: we could see the vast plain below, the meandering ribbon of the river, the contours of a distant village. For a minute or two forgetting the wretchedness of our situation I was enjoying the sight. With schoolmates and friends we often went for long walks and the landscape reminded me of the view from the Buda Hills on the Danube and over the Pest plain. What happened since then – I was brooding. What changed us so profoundly in a couple of years? How come my schoolmate and friend the soft-spoken Imre Ziegelwanger whose forebears were settlers from the Rhine during the reign of Marie Theresa in the 18th century changed his name to Szittyaváry and became an ultra radical Hungarian Nazi. And what happened to me – how did my “hungarianness” disappear into thin air? In our Budapest home a photo of my father hung on the wall in the dining room: he was sitting on a white horse, in the uniform of a captain of the Hungarian army, a soldier on a brown horse, with a big white flag in his hand was behind him...The scene was captured by a photographer of the *Érdekes Újság* during the Great War, and it was published by the popular daily on the front

page – it was quite an event as my father entered the no man's land between two armies to accept the surrender of a Bosnian regiment... At least this was the story of the photo which I heard from my mother, because my father never said anything about his combat action for which he was awarded three medals – including the golden badge for courage in action. I was proud of my father though he never spoke about his deeds during the Great War – and I thought that I would act likewise if some trouble arose. How could I perceive that all these troubles would affect us, Jews, that the parliament would enact laws depriving me and my fellow-Jews of freedom and of human rights.

All of a sudden somebody exclaimed: look out...down there...

I stood up and looked out. Far away big clouds of dust were rising over the plain. The sky was clear, it could be either a storm, or...

“The Russian offensive is under way there” said Wertheimer “or it is just another or is elastic secession of the Germans” he added with a grin.

Szuhay had a portable radio and the “keret” listened every evening to the news of the “Donausender” – the radio station of the German Army. One or two of our people succeeded from time to time in hiding nearby to listen...this way we got news quite often about the “elastic secession” of the Wehrmacht, which were commented on by the “Donausender” as were “strategic successes” – meaning that by their withdrawal the Germans were shortening their lines of supply and siphoning off the forces of the Red Army. Later on in a given moment they would launch the decisive, final victorious counter attack. Szuhay and the guards “believed every word of the Donausender. We saw Horváth, Varga and the others leaving the radio-session with cheeks aglow and in high spirits – we were thinking of course differently – we thought that the “elastic secession” was an euphemism for defeat, and we became more optimistic. We imagined that the defeat of the German Army was near: the surrender might take place after a week or two.

Looking down from the summit, the clouds over the plain became in my fantasy harbingers of the decisive battle. A forthcoming Russian offensive on the Southern front was alluded to by the Donausender anyway a few days before.

“let us remain here as long as we can” I whispered to Dini “maybe if we stay long enough, everything will be over till we get down.”

Dini nodded as a sign of approval, but our guard thought otherwise.

“Get up, you lazy swines” he shouted “there is no time to wait...there are still a dozen rolls which must be carried up today.”

Maybe he was serious...but I cannot exclude the supposition that he knew as well as I did what was happening on the plain. Varga had been for some reason which we did not exactly know, imprisoned previously – and from the prison he was escorted directly to the barracks, from there as “unreliable” – he was transferred to a forced labor battalion. This is how he became a member of our “keret”...one of our guards. “I do not hate you, Jews, he told me once – but I see clearly, what you seem not to want to acknowledge. Invincible forces of the world teamed up against you – and consequently you must die. I don’t wish it, but I cannot help you. I want to live – and you must die.”

Varga acted logically: he wanted us – and himself – to get down as soon as possible, because he knew from previous experience that after the Russian offensive began, the roads would soon be full of fleeing soldiers as well as carts and horses. It would be much more difficult to flee – which he wanted very much to do. The clouds of dust on the plain were probably signs of the artillery barrage, which usually introduced the big Russian offensives.

This time Varga pushed us without mercy – he hit those who remained behind and when Bornstein fell because of fatigue, he took his revolver and aimed at him as if he wanted to shoot him. He did not shoot however, because two boys helped Reb Bornstein to stand up

and to go on. Varga put his revolver back into its holder and laughed. These kind of mock-executions were the guards' favorite practical jokes.

The narrow road leading to Pasicna – the little village where we had our quarters in three empty stables – was already blocked by men and the vehicles of the retreating armies: Hungarian infantrymen with mules carrying machine guns on their backs, Romanian soldiers on horse-drawn carts: all of a sudden German heavy trucks appeared and pushed pedestrians and vehicles aside. The people on the road cursed while some Ukrainian peasants who were allowed by the Germans to remain in Pasicna, stood on the other bank of a rivulet called Czernawoda which flowed parallel with the road, looking at the retreating armies, terrified of an uncertain future. They were spared by the Germans – while all the Jews and most of the Poles were deported or killed, and now the Ukrainian peasants did not know what to do: to flee with the retreating Germans – or to remain and wait for the Russians who in a day or two would take the place over. Would they be considered as long-suffering Slavs liberated by their Russian brothers – or Nazi collaborators? Nobody knew what the future had in store for them.

The stables in which we used to stay were empty. Our company marched – or was driven – away a few hours before. An Ukrainian neighbour, whom I befriended more or less during our stay there, whispered this news confidentially to me as he saw us looking around in the empty stables. Alex – I knew only his first name -. was a somewhat mysterious presence. He seemed to be a collaborator: he was allowed by the Germans to move freely, and we saw him often driving his horse and cart on the road leading to the neighbouring town Stanislau – where allegedly he supplied the Germans with information concerning the Russian partisans hiding in the forests. On the other hand, it was also thought that he was a Russian spy. His wooden hut was about half a mile from the river Czernavoda, deep in the forest and it might have been quite easy for him to meet the partisans there. A few years later I found out

that both assumptions were true. As I was to be X-rayed for some suspected illness at the Budapest Policlinic at Szövetség street, I unexpectedly discovered that the head of the X-ray department was István Hajdú, who served as a physician in our forced-labor company. He confided to me, that Alex offered him a place to hide at the time of the great retreat. He agreed and Alex placed him in refuge which he prepared a mile or two from his house, in the forest. After the Russians arrived, he “handed over” the doctor he had saved.

“And what happened?” I asked Hajdú.

“Well...they investigated me thoroughly – he answered – and after that I was sent to a prisoners’ camp. I was allowed to return home two years later.”

As I asked about Alex, Hajdú shrugged his shoulders.

“ I tried to write to him, but I never got an answer – he said – It’s possible my letter never arrived.”

It was Alex, who advised us to hide and wait till the Russians arrived. We hesitated but he convinced us by saying that he knew a cave which would be a perfectly safe place for us to hide. He showed us the way to the cave he even gave us a rifle when he left us there. “It may be useful...Just in case...” he said as he left.

Though the cave was not far from the road, there was perfect silence as we squatted in it. The last men of the retreating armies had already left Pasicna and the Russians did not yet arrive. Suddenly we heard a truck approaching, then a short rattle of machine guns, followed by silence again. Later on we were told that a Russian truck tried to do what is called “forced reconnaissance” – but was fired at by machine guns when it reached the hastily established German defences. Both the driver and the major sitting beside him in the car, were killed – and as the machine guns were mounted in an old graveyard, the two corpses were buried there, immediately.

“We had to dig quite a lot especially when we buried the Major, because he was a stout fellow and he had a big nose, too.” a German soldier confided to me later on.

After the shooting there was silence again and we already had high hopes that the war would soon be over for us – we would just have to expect a comfortable war’s end in a prisoner’s camp. What a false illusion! Most of our fellows slave-laborers, who succeeded in running over died in the camps because of illness and malnutrition. The luckier ones were sent to faraway camps in Siberia and those, who survived, were allowed to return home only after three or four years. Pista Sándor, the actor, a dear friend, who entertained us reciting poems, and sometimes acting out whole dramas by Shakespeare or Racine on his own, never returned. He died in a Vorkuta mine, weakened by starvation and disease.

Soon the silence ended. We heard the noise of people approaching our cave. It was Alex with two men from the village.

“You must leave the place immediately” he said menacingly “ the Germans know that you are hiding here and a patrol may arrive any minute to get you.”

“It cannot be true... why are you lying? I looked at him sharply and I saw that he was desperate.

“The people of the village do not want you to be here when the Russians arrive” he whispered so that his companions should not hear “they will kill you if you stay”.

We discussed the situation briefly with my comrades in the back of the cave. There was no doubt in our minds that we must leave...and leave very quickly. We did not see their point clearly – it was certain however, that the people of Pasicna wanted to get rid of us. Maybe they thought that the Germans would return – may be they were afraid that we would denounce them to the Russians as collaborators.

We decided to leave the cave immediately, and to hide in the forest. It seemed a good solution because on this side of the mountain there were not pine-trees without undergrowth

as there were higher up: here were oak trees and bushes with thick foliage. You only needed to take a few steps to disappear in the thick of the forest if somebody tried to follow you.

Dini was the first to leave the cave. We followed him on a narrow path which lead into the forest. We walked in single file – with Herskovits Lejba, holding our only rifle at the end. There was perfect silence – either there were no birds in that region or for some reason they did not sing. All of a sudden we heard strange noises: a deer was breaking through the bushes. We saw its silhouette just for a second, the animal disappeared as fast as it came, I felt I as if I was wandering in a dream: a clearing followed covered with green moss, and with a brook in the middle – it looked like a diamond-blue ribbon cast away there haphazardly by some unknown hand. There were rocks on the other side of the clearing and all of a sudden we heard the rattle of a tommy gun. Lejba tried to return the fire but he did not succeed: the rifle fell out of his hand and he collapsed. As we learned later, he was shot in the chest – but miraculously the wound did not bleed, and after a few minutes Lejba stood up, he was ready to march on with us. Soon however the guy who shot at us from behind the rocks, appeared with a tommy gun in his hands, ready to continue shooting. In the grayish-green uniform of the Wehrmacht he was a young German soldier...a boy in his late teens, much younger than us, in fact I thought I saw signs of bewilderment on his face as he looked at us.

“Hände hoch” – hands up – he cried and – as he saw that we had no arms /the rifle, fortunately had disappeared in the thick undergrowth/ he gave a sign that we may let our hands down. “Wer sind sie?” – who are you – he asked perplexed.

Reb Bornstein tried to explain to him in his Yiddish-German idiom that we were members of a labor-squadron and were left behind by the retreating Hungarian army, while we were putting up barbed-wire fences on the top of the mountain. The boy did not answer. He gave a sign with his hand – whereupon another German soldier appeared from behind the

rocks. He was much older...maybe in his fifties. At that time the German army was short of men – boys of sixteen and men over fifty were called to arms.

“ Some people told us that you wanted to run over to the Russians” the older soldier said in pure Hochdeutsch which I understood quite well thanks to professor Salamon Oster who taught us German and French in Zrínyi Reálgimnázium.

I tried to explain to him that we had just lost our way while we were trying to get back to our squadron which left Pasicna unexpectedly. He did not believe my story and whispered something to the boy angrily – I had the feeling that he wanted to shoot us on the spot. However the young man did not agree.

“We must take them to the commander” he said. Then turning to us, he added: “If you try to run away we will shoot you all”.

It took us almost an hour to reach the defence line. At first we followed a narrow trail through the forest, then we reached a wiring unpaved road which lead towards the mountain. At last we arrived at the hastily organized defence line – which, as I have already mentioned – was in a cemetery, besides a small orthodox chapel between many overgrown old graves. The soldiers – as I soon realized – were using the graves for shelter, the machine guns were put up between the tomb stones. We were lead to the commander who had established his headquarters in the chapel. A middle-aged captain, with a blond moustache and a tired, pale face, he looked at us with obvious disgust. “Jews...Jews again” he mumbled. “Take them behind the chapel and let them wait there!” he ordered the boy soldier who caught us in the forest, and now stood there, probably looking forward to getting some praise for his brave act. But the captain was not happy at all. As we learned while sitting behind the chapel, he feared that the forced reconnaissance during which the Russian major and his driver were shot, was the sign of an imminent Russian attack, and the defence line was weak. It was organized by assembling fugitives who were stopped by military gendarmes at checking points and ordered

to return to the frontline. They had just the two machine guns which we had seen and a mine-thrower: munitions were scarce. Because of his age, I assumed that the captain was an officer in the reserve called up two or three years after the war began and he didn't seem very enthusiastic about soldiering.

I was sure that sitting behind the chapel, we were just waiting for our execution – so I mustered all my courage and stood up to return to the chapel. The boy-soldier guarding us did not object. He was sure that I wouldn't try to run away, because...at the first suspicious move he could spray me with bullets from his tommy gun.

I heard music as I entered the chapel. There was a portable radio on the table in front of the captain. "You like it?" he asked amiably "Jews like music, I know."

I was struck dumb by his unexpected friendliness. "Yes sir," I mumbled "I like Mozart very much."

"You speak our language quite well..." he praised my halting German..."and you recognize Mozart...Are you a musician perhaps?"

"No sir...I studied law but I want to become a writer."

A friendly chat began, while from time to time the rattle of machine guns was heard outside. The captain confided to me that he was an organist in a Berlin church and he hoped that he would be allowed to remain there – until he was called up quite unexpectedly. "Not that I am afraid of death ...I just hate the dirt, the lice, the rude words, the killing" he muttered in a self-pitying tone.

I thought, the moment has arrived to talk business.

"I think, sir, you are aware of the fact that the labor-squadron we belong to, is a unit of the Second Hungarian Army which is fighting the Bolsheviks", I said. "Even if a German patrol brought us here, our case must be dealt with by our commander...or by a Hungarian military court, if the commander thinks it appropriate".

I knew nothing of the military organizational system I was alluding to...I was just trying to play for time.

"I cannot hand you over to the Hungarians, I have order to have all the captured Jews summarily executed...the captain retorted with the same amicable expression on his face "all the Jews without exception...Polish or Ukrainian, German or Hungarian. You will not be the first ones...and besides that what would happen if you were not executed this time...ultimately, you would die anyway. I do not say that I am happy with the decision that has been made somewhere in the highest echelons but I must comply with orders. I can however assure you, that the execution will be carried out humanely. I am sure that when one is shot one loses consciousness before the pain is acknowledged by the brain."

The captain gave me a bar of German ersatz – chocolate.

I left the chapel with the assurance – given in the friendliest way by the captain – that we would be executed within a few hours. My comrades looked at me and I tried to smile. "The captain assured me that it will not hurt" I said. "Nonetheless, I still have some hope."

I was thinking of an attempt: we could perhaps knock down the guard, trying to run away all at once...maybe not all of us would be killed during the subsequent shooting...Even if just one of two of us succeeded in escaping and hiding in the forest the attempt would be worth while ...better than being slaughtered like animals at the abattoir. It was rubbish, of course, just one of the machine guns would have been able to kill the six of us with a single volley. A more realistic attempt – which I did not immediately recognize – took place however in the meantime.

I have not mentioned Gyuri Yahya until now, one of the "oldest" members of our group: a tall, good looking, reticent guy, we called him lovingly "the prince" because of his refined manner and elegance, which he succeeded in maintaining somehow even in our misery. We knew that he was one of the few Sephardim in Hungary – from "Sepharad", i.e-

Spain his Jewish ancestors fled to Saloniki, which at that time belonged to the Ottoman Empire; his great-grandfather began to deal with oriental tapestry in Hungary. The Yahyas had a famous tapestry shop in downtown Budapest, in the elegant neighbourhood of Kossuth Lajos street.

Gyuri had dark hair and big almond-shaped black eyes, but otherwise there was nothing “oriental” in his appearance: he was a graduate of the Berzsenyi Gimnázium, one of the best high schools in Budapest, and though he was not admitted to the University because of the anti-Jewish law called “Numerus Clausus” while he worked in his father’s shop, he attended the meetings of the Vajda János Literary Club and – as he confided to me – was planning to write a novel. Gyuri was one of us – non-observant assimilated Jews I thought. I didn’t have the faintest idea that the Yahyas spoke not Hungarian but in the ancient language of the Spanish Jews-ladino, in their family-circle, when they were at home. Nor did I know they were jealously guarding an old prayer book which was printed in Toledo many centuries ago. Now his ladino became a mean of communication with some of the soldiers around us. As it turned out, they were Italians – originally members of the “Azure Battalion” which Mussolini dispatched to fight the Red Army...”voluntarily”. During the Russian offensive, the Italian battalion was dispersed, and during their flight some of the Italians were stopped at one of the checkpoints by the camp-gendarmes and they were ordered to join the German squadron in the valley. They were exhausted and hungry and they were angry because they did not get the honey and the cigarettes which the Germans were supplied with. Also they were indignant because the Germans ordered them “to do the dirty jobs”. When Gyuri asked one of the Italians what he meant by this, he did not answer. He just shrugged his shoulder and spat out.

After some time a greenish-grey car stopped at the chapel. The driver opened the door for and a tall, haggard major – a Prussian I thought – got out. He threw a meascingful glance

at us as if he already knew of our presence – and then disappeared into the chapel. I heard his voice from the inside but I was uncertain whether he was shouting or this was the normal way Prussian majors communicated with their subordinates. Anyway, after he left, the captain summoned the three Italians to the chapel. When they returned, they were silent and noticeably scared.

We were scared too...but as I am trying to evoke my feelings now, many years after the event, it occurs to me that I was much more angry than scared. Sceptical and non – observant Jew as I was I asked myself angrily: why did I studied the writings of Isaac Abrabanel to learn about the ideas of the Jews of Spain during the previous holocaust? Why had I read spell-bound his nonsensical predictions about the coming of the Messiah in his times?

Based on the Prop Daniel's dream, Don Isaac pronounced that the Messiah will come in the year 1503 – just a few years following the expulsion of the Jews from Spain. Why did my ancestors, like Abranabel just wait for the Messiah who would save them to come. Why did they believe in the mystique of the cabbala rather than the real facts of the life...and try to fight. After five hundred years why was I acting like those Jews who did not want to leave their comfortable lives in Spain, who became Marranos hoping to save themselves and their fortunes...and ultimately ended up tortured and burned at the stake? Were we not doing the same? Moritz Reinhold, who – with his wife – succeeded in fleeing Vienna told me about the horrors that happened after the Anschluss: the killings, the deportations...their lucky escape with the help of a friend, a diplomat. We all knew what was happening a few hundred kilometers from Budapest – and hope against hope, we remained. Did we think that the Messiah would come and save us? He did not save Abrabanel in 1503...why would he save in 1944?

“They got orders to execute us” Yahya whispered, pointing with his head towards the Italians. “I heard them talking about it. The one who was in the chapel told them so.”

A long silence followed. All of us knew that these were the last minutes of our lives and even the non-believers were praying, I think. The only one to speak up was Reb Borenstein.

“Why don’t we make a collection” he said in his special Yiddish-Hungarian vernacular “maybe we could gain time and who knows?”

Without uttering a word, each of us handed over the “valuables” we still owned. Cigarettes, watches, a bottle of apricot-brandy which Dini succeeded in hiding somehow, now - Yahya handed over to the Italians secretly the bundle containing our treasures. They were accepted with obvious pleasure. One of them a short man with an aquiline nose and a dark complexion – probably a Sicilian – smiled and gave a sign which meant “let’s fuck them” i.e. the Germans. Then he opened the bottle of brandy with his teeth and they started to drink...

The last minutes of our lives were extended: the Russians started shooting with their favourite mine-throwers and the Germans were returning the fire without conviction. The captain left his comfortable place in the chapel and tried to enliven the feeble defence ...From a distance the sound of approaching Russian tanks could be heard...I hoped that perhaps he had forgotten about us...but I was mistaken, he was meticulous in fulfilling the order of the Endlösung. (I am using the expression retroactively now, I did not know it then...none of us knew it at that time). The captain stopped and shouted at the Italians:

“Was wartet ihr noch, Schweine...erledige die Juden...” (What are you waiting for, swines, finish the Jews off).

The Sicilian grabbed me – “March!” he shouted. “Run as quickly as you can” he whispered then into my ears. I started running immediately of course towards the skirts of the forest, about two or three hundred meters from the cemetery. All six of us were running when

we heard the series of shots...the Italians were shooting at us with their tommy guns. They cannot have been very good marksmen because none of their bullets hit us. After a few minutes we were already in the dense forest: for the time being we were safe. Outside of the forest the battle was on but the rattle of the machine-guns and the sound of explosions became fainter as we marched on and on and further and further from the battlefield. Later on we found a quiet road which seemed to lead the right direction- we sat down beside a ditch, and Dini axclaimed:

“A clover! I’ve found a four leaved clover! We are going to be lucky!”

“We already have been , I presume” Reb Borenstein Said softly.

I hope that the three Italians were lucky too...the ongoing battle was ravaging for several days and the meticulous captain hardly had the opportunity or the time to call them to account for the missing six corpses. I do not know their names, their whereabouts...I say to them grazie, mille grazie, amici this way.

The brown suit

If one day you paid a visit to my Szentendre cottage, I would show you an old suit hanging in the wardrobe for more than fifty years. It is of heavy woolen material, made by a tailor called Pecinka at the town Kassa as indicated by the yellowish, hardly legible label inside the jacket. It does not fit me anymore because my waist has become somewhat thicker during the past five decades, nonetheless I keep brushing it from time to time. I even put mothballs into its pockets against the moths which abound here in summertime.

I treasure this old suit because it makes me remember times past...and friends who have passed away. I have the feeling that their souls are hovering around me as I am holding the suit towards the light, looking for the remnants of bloodstains of yore. I wonder – how can split blood disappear without a trace?

It was around Christmas time when we arrived at Kassa – which is now called Kosice, a town in Slovakia. It was a long march from the Eastern front through the Carpathian Mountains and over the slopes leading to the fertile Great Plain and towards Budapest, so we hoped. This hope kept us marching, ill and skeleton-like Jewish slave-laborers as we were, driven by a cruel “keret” – as our bloodthirsty guards were called. Most of us were drafted in Budapest – and each of us was hoping to return and find home and family there. A very faint hope it was – in the villages we marched through there were no Jews left alive. The peasants were not allowed to talk to us – and we tried to comfort ourselves with the thought that maybe the Jews of the villages were sent to urban ghettos. It was a well kept secret that two thirds of the six hundred thousand Hungarian Jews were already deported and shot, gassed or tortured to death in German concentration camps.

It was freezing cold when we arrived at Kassa – and the commanders of the Hungarian army had the wonderful idea of “quartering” us in a disused brick factory. They were sheds in which the bricks used to be stored and as no bricks were being produced, they were empty at that time: There were just roofs – no walls, the wind blew unhindered through the sheds at a cruel, subzero temperature. Possibly more forced-laborers were alive than the high command had thought – about fifteen thousand Jewish males marched towards Kassa from the Eastern front. It must have been a difficult logistical problem for the Hungarian officers whose task it was to dispose of us.

I tried to find a place in one of the sheds under a roof – and succeeded though quite a fight was going on and I was not the pushy type. Two friends – Dini and Gyuri – helped me by “reserving” a place between them – thanks to them – I could sleep with a roof over my head.

Dini – as I mentioned earlier – was a stocky, strong fellow, an engraver in civilian life. He was with me when we were captured and almost executed by the Germans. He behaved bravely then, but now he was adamant in rejecting my plan for a further attempt to escape. “I have a family at home” he said I have no right to take more risks. I must survive”.

Gyuri Sajó was of a different type. He was one of the few among us who had somehow become a well-to-do citizen already. He had some kind of business in Budapest – I do not recall what he was dealing in; anyway, he had plenty of money even now and was always ready to spend – and to help the poor. One of his protégés was Chajim Klein, a “flickschneider” – a jobbing tailor – by profession. He was always ready to mend our clothes – if the rags we had on could be called clothes though physically weak, he was strong and adamant in his faith. He managed somehow to remain kosher – and preferred to fast when, on rare occasions, we got some pork.

Though there were guards around the “camp” – the Hungarian military could not hold the crowd of about fifteen thousand young men together. Now, many years after the event, I presume that – while the high command was determined to hand us over to the Germans – many of the soldiers were compassionate and were ready to allow us to flee. This was shown by the fact that – when there was no officer present – the guards standing at the gates did not stop anybody who tried to leave the camp...It was not even necessary to bribe them or to give some pretext, like one was leaving the camp for a few minutes to buy cigarettes in the tobacco shop nearby or something.

Two days after our arrival, I took advantage of this possibility. As I could not circulate in the town in my ragged clothing, somebody lent me his treasured coat, from another guy I got a pair of usable trousers, I even received a hat – with a label inside “made in England” – from Hirsch, who was a member of a famous rich dynasty of leather manufacturers.

Around four o'clock I approached the gate with firm steps – with a coin of five pengős in my hand. The guard standing at the gate turned his back to me as if he had not seen me approach – nonetheless, I stuck the coin in the pocket of his coat. “Take care of the gendarmes” he mumbled without looking at me.

I shall never forget the ecstasy which overcome me, as I left the freezing darkness of the camp and entered the world of city lights. Though the front was not far, the Soviet army was just 20 or 25 miles away, and from time to time even the roar of detonations could be heard when the wind was blowing from the north east – the lights were on in the streets and in the shop windows and people were walking in the streets. This peaceful urban life struck me as unreal in those times of horror. I knew of course that Kassa is one of the most civilized urban communities which ever existed, its burghers defended their freedom against kings and warlords, rejected religious and racial hatred during the long history of the town...but their quiet, almost nonchalant behaviour, between two armies, surprised me. Later on I learned the

reason for their calm: according to a rumour which was circulating in the town, the Czechoslovak government in exile received a promise from the Soviet High Command that the town would not be bombed and after its seizure the Soviet Army would consider Kassa and its citizens as belonging to the Allies.

Anyway – I was roving the streets in a stupour – listening to the distant roar of detonations, meeting Hungarian and German officers, who seemed quite happy with the situation and fortunately did not notice me. Near the cathedral I discovered sign on the main door of a block of flats. “Étkezde az első emeleten” – Diner on the first floor – announced its text. I was very hungry – and as I had some money in my pocket, I went in the gate and on the old mock-marble stairs, up to the diner.

Originally it must have been a flat – and it had been transformed in a pathetic way into a diner. The dark vestibule was seemingly used as a store-room for old furniture and there were big piles of books probably to make room for the tables and chairs in the dining room itself. The dinner was already full of guests as I entered.

I felt bad. The coat I had borrowed was quite acceptable as well as the trousers but I had no jacket, just my own ragged pullover under the coat. The room was heated, the people sitting at the tables were well-dressed citizens. I could not sit down with my coat on – while on the other hand, I assumed that if I put it down they would realize who I was. It was obligatory to denounce a fugitive Jew...and I saw immediately that there was a telephone nearby.

While I was standing not knowing what to do, a middle-aged woman came up to me, smiling.

“We have meat-broth and stuffed cabbage today...I hope you will like the food” she said. “Would you mind, doctor, if this young man joined you?” she asked a man with gold-rimmed glasses, sitting at a table nearby.

The man made a gesture with his hand inviting me to his table. A youngish, blond woman in a dark-blue suit and a bearded elderly gentleman were already sitting at the table. Nobody seemed to take any notice of my strange appearance, they just greeted me and continued their conversation about a book which I gathered had appeared recently. It was a book by Sándor Márai: they were talking about its author as “a mi Sanyink” – our Alex – not only because Márai was the offspring of a well-known family from Kassa, the Grosschmidts, but also because they seemed to agree with his ideas. As I am writing these memoirs, fifty years later in my Budapest study overlooking the Buda Hills, Márai’s books are bestsellers all over the country. After World War he emigrated and continued to live unknown and forgotten in Italy...ultimately he committed suicide. Somebody later on translated one of his novels – “A gyertyák csonkig égnek” – and after its publication in Italian it became an instant success. The book was published also in German and in English...even the Hungarians seem to have rediscovered Márai’s art and humanity.

I have lost my homes several times during the war, and the upheavals following it but – a volume by Márai somehow miraculously survived the bombings, and the persecutions...even more miraculously, I found it among the hundreds of books lying in heaps under the overflowing book-shelves around the walls. The book bears the unaccustomed title: *Röpirat a nemzetnevelés ügyében*. A “pamphlet concerning the education of the nation”. It was published in 1942, I probably bought it a few months before I was drafted to forced labour. As I am re-reading it now, it strikes me as a prophecy; I quote here just a few lines; in my own translation: “...the future Europe can’t be seen otherwise than one big territory without barriers of customs, producing and distributing products without any artificial hindrance, where the European soul will assert its capabilities without the impediment of local interests. It may sound improbable today, but in a few years instead of a Europe tragically dismembered by economic and ideological interests, a new Europe will be

built where the citizens of all the countries may travel freely, no entry visas will be necessary, they can pay with the same currency in Oslo and Naples and the Norwegian fisherman will be able to dispatch his fish freely to the Bulgarian salesman...”

Like Márai’s prophecy – our conversation was also quite improbable at a time when gangs of the Arrow-Cross mob were chasing and executing people on the streets, the machinery of the factories and steam mills were dismantled and transported to Germany and the front-page of the newspapers carried news about the “Wunderwaffen” – the new, “miraculous” German weapons which would destroy England and end the war, resulting in the final victory (the “Endsieg”) of the Third Reich. The man with the gold-rimmed glasses – as I gathered from their conversation – was a librarian. He spoke with anguish of the treasures of the library which he and his colleagues transported into vaulted cellars to protect them against bombing fire – and now the old books and manuscripts were in danger of being found by a team of German “treasure hunters” who trucked everything down to “save it from the red hordes” – i.e. to transport it to Germany.

He spoke in such an open way that I was astounded.

“We succeeded in getting some Judaica out of the Synagogue – he added without looking at me – but we did not find some of the most important documents and the Arrow Cross will burn them, I am afraid.”

“My collection does not interest them I hope – the bearded man interrupted smiling – they are not after bones and stuffed animals, I suppose.”

He taught natural history in a secondary school as I learned somewhat later and his greatest problem at present was that his pupils, the boys of “levente” age – from sixteen to eighteen – were being drafted. Officially it was proclaimed that they would do “unarmed duty” – but in fact, they were given arms and were obliged to fight. Professor Schuller tried to persuade the parents secretly to keep their sons from joining the ranks...An advice which

might have cost him his life if anybody had denounced him. Fortunately nobody had – up to now.

While I was eating the last roll of stuffed cabbage, Professor Schuller unexpectedly turned to me. “You should not return to wherever you came from” he whispered. “I know a safe place for you...I mean among the stuffed animals” he added jokingly.

I was moved by his witty offer. Until then I had only experienced hatred or ...indifference...and he must have known who I was.

“Thank you very much sir” I muttered “but I cannot leave my friends alone...there are three of us.”

“That means trouble,” he said. “There is only room for one, I cannot take the three of you into my house, it would be too dangerous both for you and for my family and there is only room for one in the school. I am not above suspicion, to put it mildly.”

He said this nonchalantly – but after the war, when I met his widow, she told me that Professor Schuller was in fact a member of the resistance. Emissaries of the partisans from the mountains were secret visitors to his house – this was probably the reason why he did not wish to keep us there.

Jelena, the blond woman sitting opposite me at the table, did not take part in the conversation. However, after she finished her lunch and was leaving, she winked at me to follow. I found her waiting for me in the staircase.

“I have very good ears...she said when I joined her...”the three of you should come to the hospital. I am a nurse there. You will find me at the department for internal medicine. My name is Jelena. Just ask for me there...” She left abruptly, and I returned to the camp.

Both Dini and Gyuri hesitated when I mentioned to them my plan to flee and to hide in the hospital...until the “siege of Kassa” was over and the Russians arrived. “As long as we

are here, we are more or less protected by the Hungarian Army” Dini said. “ If we leave the camp, we will be vogelfrei” Gyuri added “any Arrow Cross gangster could kill us.”

Chajim Klein was of the same opinion, though his reasoning was different. His faith was rock solid. He believed adamantly that Yahwe would save us in some unforeseen way which surpasses human comprehension.

Suddenly a sergeant appeared shouting that each squadron should send a man to shed Number One. “Major Tóth wants to give you some information” he added seeing that nobody wanted to move.

We were afraid of course. It was always dangerous to step out of obscurity, it was safer to remain unknown the crowd.

Nonetheless – I felt a curious urge. A feeling which at critical points of my life always urged me to act. Sometimes against common sense and reason. Possibly this was the hidden strength I inherited from my sephard ancestors who thus escaped the bonfires of the inquisition.

“Ay ay sir, I will go” I said and started immediately towards shed Number One.

In fact the meeting took place outside the shed, but under a protruding roof which was very useful because it started snowing again. Major Tóth was a tall, good looking man, with a very Hungarian moustache and an array of medals on his uniform. He looked with an almost coquettish smile at the forty odd ragged slave laborers in front of him.

“I asked you to come here because I want to say farewell to you in the name of the Hungarian Army – he said - and I want to inform you about your future.” He stopped for a minute, and then continued emotionally: “You did a good job, and Hungary is grateful to all of you. You will continue your work from now on in Germany. We are handing you over to Hungary’s great ally, who will take good care of you. I wish you good luck and a happy return to Hungary after the war.”

“What will be our destination in Germany?” somebody asked the Major.

“Most of you will work in towns which are not being bombed.”

“What kind of work will we do?” another man asked.

“Well...you know what excellent organizers the Germans are” the Major answered smiling. Each of you will do the kind of work he knows best, of course.”

“What kind of work will I do, sir” a middle-aged man standing near to me asked. “I am an artist. A painter.”

“Well...you will work in a studio, of course” the Major reassured him “By the way...what is your name?”

“I am Ferenc Hatvany” the man said slowly and I recognized him, as I looked at him – he was Baron Ferenc Hatvany. a member of the great Jewish family, which founded the sugar-industry in Hungary and got the baronetcy from King-Emperor Francis Joseph at the turn of the century.

A young German soldier was standing nearby, observing the event. He had the uniform and the insignia of the SD abbreviation of Sonderdienst and he seemed to understand our language...he was probably one of the members of the Volksbund – the association of Germans living in Hungary – many of whom joined the ranks of the German SS.

He had listened passively until now, but as the Major reassured Baron Hatvany that would be working in a painter’s atelier in Germany, a contemptuous smile appeared around his lips, he turned around and left the place, laughing.

At that moment I decided I would definitely flee: Later on I learned that the members of the Sonderdienst were a special kind of SS-men, the guards and the executioners in the concentration camps.

“Let’s leave immediately” I told my friends when I returned to our shed. “Before they deport us to Germany.”

Both of them hesitated. But I was adamant. I told them that I was leaving immediately – because I wanted to buy some acceptable clothes for myself – and they should follow me two hours later. We should meet in the hospital, - I said. I told them Jelena's name and – leaving all my earthy possession there –I left. The guard took the five pengő coin without a word and allowed me to pass.

During lunch in the diner I heard the name and address of a certain István Szalay, a hairdresser by profession who was also dealing in second hand clothing. I hoped to buy a good suit...and to get a haircut too.

I found Szalay's place easily: he had a shop in the neighbourhood of the Cathedral, a "barber's plate" of copper was hanging over the shop sign, there were many mirrors inside the shop – they evoked memories of the barber's shop at Szarvas, where I discovered the miracle of infinity: mirrors mirroring another mirror which mirrored the reflected image...and so on. Szalay was a stout man in his forties, a proud burgher of Kassa of ancient stock, as shown by the guild badges and old framed documents hanging on the walls. He was also desperate: his wife of Jewish origin had been seized by the police during a raid, and she had disappeared without a trace...possibly she was deported, though even the so called Second Jewish Law exempted her – she was baptized, became a member of the Calvinist Church and she married a gentile.

"They do not even keep their own laws" Szalay told me bitterly, while he was shaving me skillfully with his sharp, traditional razor.

Professor Schuller told me that I could speak openly to Szalay, so immediately I arrived, I told him that I was a Jew, I was a fugitive – and I needed a suit.

"You are in luck" – he said – "somebody left an elegant suit here just yesterday on commission. You may have it, if it fits you."

He went to the store-room and brought out the brown suit...which I keep in the wardrobe of my Szentendre house.

The suit fitted me well. However, Szalay remained a good businessman even in his sorrow.

“The price is just five hundred pengős” he said “pure wool” he added.

The suit just was (and is) indeed of pure wool. But I did not have five hundred pengős.

“This is all I have” – I showed him the content of my purse...two hundred and thirty pengős.

“Two hundred and thirty...and your ring” Szalay said with a glance at my gold wedding ring.

I did not object – though the ring was my only treasure. I had been wearing it since my marriage to Noemi in the Dohány-utca Synagogue and I hoped to keep it till the end of my life.

“Here you are” I said, handing over the money and the ring.

“If I may give you some advice – Szalay said – leave Kassa as soon as possible.”

I did not follow his advice – though the forthcoming events proved that he was right. In the store room I put the “new” suit on, and leaving my rags behind, I was soon on my way to the hospital. I arrived there about 2 p.m., Jelena was already waiting for me. She was now in her white dress with a white cap on her head even prettier than at our first meeting in the dinner.

“Welcome” she said cheerfully “I have already spoken to Doctor Matthias and he promised that he would admit you to his ward for few days. By the way...why did you come alone? What happened to your comrades? I hope they did not get caught...”

I assured her that Dini and Gyuri would come soon – and, in fact they arrived in half an hour. Jelena kissed them on the cheek – I had a kiss on my lips earlier.

“Well, she said – now we shall go to the doctor.”

I can't recall Matthias' face. I remember only his eyes and his mistrustful glance as he scrutinized us one after the other.

“Jelena told me that you are Hungarian refugees – he said after a long silence – where do you come from?”

I realized that Jelena for some reason did not tell the full truth about us. She did not lie...we were indeed refugees after all.

“We are refugees from Ungvár” I answered with a presence of mind which surprised even myself. Ungvár - was a town in the Northern Carpathian Basin, which before the Great War belonged to Hungary; later it became part of the Ukraine.

“How come you are not in uniform?” the doctor asked “young men of your age should be fighting the Bolsheviks?”

I had already prepared a story in my mind, for such a case: the best lie is to tell the truth. “We are construction workers. We were building a road through the Legion Pass for the army – I said – therefore we have been exempted from the draft.” We had in fact been doing building work; it was that we were forced laborers, not civilian construction workers.

Matthias looked at me again, I perceived that he was hesitating not knowing whether to believe my story or not. “Have you some documents to prove that you are exempted from the draft?” asked.

We had of course no such documents. The documents we had were of no use: in Hungary, between the two World Wars the second item – after the name of the holder all the three of us – was: “religion”. And we were Jewish.

Luckily, one document did not contain any reference to the religion of the holder: the formula of the certificate of Hungarian citizenship was probably designed before the anti-Semitic era and for some unknown reason it had not occur to anybody to change its text. It

indicated just the name, the date and place of birth and the statement that the holder was a Hungarian citizen; by some lucky intuition I had the certificate with me.

“Here you are, sir” I said, handing him over my certificate.

He read it carefully then suddenly he looked at me and asked pointedly:

“Is this your original name? Didn’t you have another name before you magyarized it?”

“I was born with his name” I answered with confidence, because this was the truth. My father changed the name Fischer to the Hungarian equivalent, Halász, many years before I was born. Like most Jews around the turn of the century, he was an ardent Hungarian patriot.

Matthias was however not convinced. “Halász...Halász...the name sounds very Israel to me” he said suspiciously. “What about the documents of the other two” he continued the inquiry.

Dini and Gyuri had no document without the indication of their religion – they just shook their heads, without uttering a word.

After a few minutes of silence Doctor Matthias seemed to have arrived at some positive decision. “All right, he said, I shall take care of your admittance to the hospital. Just wait here for me.” He left with a cold smile (which somehow reminded me of the SD officer in the camp.

I looked at Jelena. She was aghast.

“You must disappear immediately” she whispered” he may call the police...I never thought he would be that base...”

There was luckily a side-door and Jelena waved us to leave as fast as possible through that door, avoiding the entrance hall, where dozens of patients were waiting for the doctor. “Wait for me in the diner” she said as she closed the door after us.

The big courtyard of the hospital was fortunately full of people – it was just the time when visitors were allowed into the wards – and we could easily disappear in the crowd.

From a distance, we saw Doctor Matthias hurrying towards the main building, accompanied by two policemen.

It was one of the most distressing scenes of my life. I would not have minded if the doctor had told us: sorry but he could not admit us to his ward, because he could – or would – not take the risk... After all, he might have had a family, responsibility for a wife and children. Even a reluctance to hide fugitives would have been understandable to me. But his wish to hand us over to our executioners was an act of cold and deadly cruelty, a twentieth century variety of the mediaeval hatred which sent the ~~marranos~~ to the stake and attended with joy /the torments of the auto-da-fés. Even today-fifty years after the event, I am brooding over the origins of the hatred which was living in the minds of people like Matthias...a doctor who took the Hyppocratic oath to help the suffering, the ill, the weak...Why did he want (and almost succeeded) to send the three of us to the gas chamber....the up-to date version of the stake.

Jelena arrived at the diner at about seven o'clock at the end of her shift. She didn't take off her coat, as she wanted to take us immediately to her home at Templom-utca before curfew which would begin at eight. "The patrols of the military police do their rounds – she said – and though I know one or two good tricks...it is better to avoid them."

She lived on the main floor of a very old house. I would have enjoyed walking in the narrow, cobbled streets, which exuded the atmosphere of past centuries. There was a well – seemingly still in use – in the center of a little square. Most of the shops were closed, but in one of them I saw an old shoemaker at work – Jelena greeted him and he said hallo without stopping his work.

Jelena's flat consisted of kitchen and a big room, which was separated from the kitchen by a door with little windows in the top part. She lit the stove and when the water was warm enough, she announced: "Now I shall bath you".

She did this with the routine of a trained nurse: she put a washbowl on the floor, she washed each of us thoroughly – one after the other – from head to foot with soap, water and a sponge. She dried us with a clean and soft towel...after the cold and the dirt in the brick-factory we felt as if we were in heaven.

Jelena prepared some food for us, which we devoured greedily in a few seconds. Then she sent us to the neighboring room, to sleep. There were only two beds in the room. Gyuri, with his customary cuteness, immediately occupied one of them – Dini and I bedded ourselves down somehow on the floor.

After the “bath” with full stomachs we soon fell asleep...I do not know, whether it was after just a few minutes or a couple hours that we were woken by the sound of a door: as we were in the dark and the kitchen was well lit, we could clearly see a man entering the kitchen. He was a Hungarian soldier, wearing on his uniform the metal badge of the camp gendarmes. “This is the end” I thought. The “camp gendarmes” were the bloodhounds of the army – their task was to catch deserters and Jews, they had the right to execute anybody on the spot “in case of an attempt to escape” – and they made use of this right very often...even if the person in question did not try to escape at all.

The gendarme however entered without any sign of hostility...He even had a box in his hand – a present for Jelena. She opened the box and when she discovered that there were a pair of shoes in it she almost cried for joy. She started to reheat the remnants of the paprikás, he took off the badge, the coat and sat down at the table – looking forward to a magnificent dinner...and other goodies. They had probably met earlier and he was hungry for sex. His amorous mood however could easily have turned into a murderous rage if he found us in the next room. “We can overpower him” – Dini whispered “ he will probably not take his gun with him to make love...”

We all agreed. In the worst case one of us would die, but the other two may survive.

To be honest – I was looking forward to the prospective fight. I was fed up with the paralyzed acquiescence in the inevitable fate of my fellow-Jews. Earlier, on the front, I wanted to run over to the Russians...now I would have preferred to fight this bloodhound with my bare fists, rather than allow him to dispose of us without any resistance.

The story continued, however, in an unexpected way. While the gendarme was drinking the wine which Jelena was cute enough to offer him – she left him alone in the kitchen with some pretext, and came into the dark room, where we were hiding.

“Here is the key to the side-door” she whispered to me and handed over the key which opened a door hidden by a curtain. “Be...quick...” she said drawing the curtain “get out as fast as you can”. As I looked back, I saw her returning to the kitchen to the love-hungry gendarme. Jelena was warm-hearted – and indeed impartial.

We found ourselves in a dark cold tunnel – piles of firewood and coal were stored in cells divided by fences – probably the winter fuel of the inhabitants of the house. We were hesitant as to what to do next. Gyuri was hysterical: he wanted to leave immediately and argued vehemently that a patrol might find us there any moment. Dini and I were opposed to his idea. The streets were empty – we would be caught in no time, we argued.

There was only one option: to stay there until the early morning hours and to leave when there would be some traffic on the streets.

We decided – two votes against one – that we would stay.

“There must be a cellar...let us hide there” I suggested.

It was a bad idea. Never in my life would I spend a night in a cellar again. It was in fact a mouse trap made of brick and stone.

Many years later I visited the Tokaj wine region and my hosts lead me through the underground labyrinth which was carved into rocks during the past century...sometimes to store barrels of Tokaj wine, sometimes for use as a refuge. While wandering in the labyrinth

we arrived at chamber-like place, with a stove made of stone. This was the place where Prince Ferenc Rákóczi, the leader of one of the Hungarian revolutions against Habsburg rule, was hiding – I was told. While the gendarmes of the Emperor were searching for him all around the Tokaj region – which belonged to the Prince's vast estates – Rákóczi was hiding quietly in the rock chamber. His faithful servant even cooked for him...the remnants of soot were still visible on the stove. The Prince succeeded in escaping...but he was a Prince, the head of a popular movement...not a persecuted Jew, a nonentity, who might be killed by anybody with impunity, such as ourselves. While I was standing in the rock chamber, the memories of that night in the cellar of the old house at Kassa came flooding back into my mind. I remembered the darkness, the strange shrieks of the rats running around us, then quite unexpectedly, the air raid: the howling of sirens, the voices of the inhabitants of the house coming down into the cellar which served as an air-raid shelter...Our terror that we would be discovered by them...

We tried to disappear in a remote, dark part of the cellar, behind piles of firewood...Unfortunately, one of the families living in the house, were the proud owners of a dog – pedigree vizsla as I later learned – and the dog signaled our presence there with unmistakable, snappy barking.

"There is some stranger here" I heard the voice of a man "there may even be more than one. I must have a look..." he added.

"Here is my revolver...take it with you" another man said "they may be brigands...don't hesitate to shoot."

"For God's sake, don't move" a woman said hysterically if they are brigands, they will shoot first..."

"They are not brigands" the first man mumbled "the dog did not say so..."

Since that time I believe that dog can speak...or, to be more precise, the Hungarian vizsla can express his ideas clearly...it's just that not everybody understands.

“Please do not be afraid...we are refugees from Ungvár” I said in the most pleasant way I could muster “at the time of the air raid we were just in your street and we tried to take shelter in this cellar. As soon as the air raid is over, we will leave your house.”

They did not answer immediately. Probably they were discussing the situation in whispers.

“Please stay where you are” the first voice finally announced. “If you remain where you are now, you must not leave the shelter. You may spend the night here...and leave in the morning.”

The vizsla saved us...at least temporarily. The gendarme – luckily – did not join us in the shelter, he probably preferred Jelena’s bed to the cold cellar. But if he turned up later on, during the morning hours, he might cause trouble...to put it mildly – I mused. Even if he did not come...what should we do? There would be no point asking Jelena to give us shelter...her flat had become a mortal trap for us...the gendarme or one of his colleagues may return.

“Your idea is impracticable” Gyuri said despondently “we cannot make it...whatever we do, we will be caught and shot. It would be safer in the camp. I’ve decided to go back.”

“I will stay with you” Dini whispered to me “I don’t want to go back...whatever happens.”

For a couple of hours nothing happened. The air raid ended without bombing, the inhabitants of the house left the cellar and returned to their homes without saying goodbye...and at about seven o’clock in the morning we decided to leave. To diminish the risk, Gyuri left the house first – alone. We shook hands, he opened the gate – and he was gone. There was perfect silence...for a few seconds we heard the patter of his foot steps, as – turning to the right – he marched towards the camp...then silence again.

It was our turn now to leave. We started marching in the opposite direction – to the left – with the aim of finding Professor Schuller’s school. He would give us temporary refuge – or so we hoped.

It was a bad decision to go in that direction. As we crossed the next side street, a gendarme emerged from somewhere. I recognized him. It was “our gendarme- Jelena’s unexpected visitor the night before. I do not know whether Jelena told him about us – and I hope very much that she did not, because it would destroy my last illusion about human compassion in this part of the world. – Maybe he heard the noises as we hurriedly left the bedroom, maybe some instinct was working in him – anyway, he left Jelena in time to lie in wait for us there at the crossroads; Gyuri was lucky to have gone in the opposite direction.

“Stop! Hands up!” the gendarme shouted leveling his gun at us.

We did not follow his orders...but started to run. One second later the gendarme started shooting. I just guessed that Dini was hit because he stumbled...but I did not look back, I just ran as fast as I could. Later on, as I was sitting on a stool in front of Professor Schuller’s stuffed animals, I discovered a blood stain on my brown suit. It was Dini’s. I learned after the war that he did not die immediately: he was just wounded. He was carried to the camp and after a few days he was deported – together with Gyuri – they were both killed in the Mauthausen concentration camp.

I got a good breakfast from Professor Schuller – and an advice which sounded so crazy that I immediately decided to follow it. Who would think that a fugitive Jew would visit the German consulate to ask for “safe conduct”. I asked the stuffed kangaroo who looked at me compassionately with his glass eyes.

I shaved, had a shower (which was a celestial delight) and left for the German consulate.

The elegant villa which was the seat of the consulate, was in a very un-Germanic turmoil. There were two or three big crates in the office and a young and very pretty woman – who I thought must have been the secretary – was putting bundles of documents into them. They were preparing to leave Kassa, it seemed.

“I am a volkdeutsch – I told the lady who stopped packing for a minute – and I want to leave for Germany. Would you kindly tell Herr Konsul that I request him to give me a laissez passer because otherwise the Hungarian military will force me to join their ranks.”

“Do you have some documents?” she asked without much interest in her voice.

“Of course I do” I answered and handed over my certificate of Hungarian citizenship.

“Your name sounds not at all German” she said coldly “on the contrary ...it sounds very Hungarian.”

“The name was originally Fischer” I answered retaining my calm “it was customary at the turn of the century to magyarize names. This is how my father changed the family name.”

She did not answer, just continued to scrutinize the document.

You have a doctorate according to this certification” she looked at me astonished “well...you are a physician – I presume”.

She turned around and went into the neighboring room. I heard her telling the consul:

“A young physician is here...he says he is volksdeutsch and he wishes to leave Hungary to serve the Reich.”

After a few minutes the consul came over, with my certificate in his hand. He was a good looking young man, impeccably clad even in the turmoil of the hasty departure.

„It is a good idea to leave Hungary and to return to your roots, doctor” he said “my secretary will type the laissez passer you need and I shall immediately sign it. By way she told me that your German is not very good – he added – but you will learn the language of your

ancestors in no time, I am sure.” He nodded benevolently and left the room. After a few minutes I was given the letter of free conduct duly signed and stamped with the swatiska.

I left as a medical doctor and a member of the Invincible German Race.

Now I had to decide what to do next. I did not wish to go to Germany, of course, though, in the *laissez passer* the consul gave me, Vienna was indicated as my destination – where I should register with the German authorities. My aim was somehow to return to Budapest, where my wife and my parents were living – or so I hoped. As the Soviet Army had already occupied the area to the East and to the South of Kassa, there was just one possible way: to make a detour through Slovakia. As I heard, the trains were still running between Bratislava and Budapest.

First of all, however, I needed a warm shower and a good sleep. I could not return to Jelena’s home, of course, even to visit Professor Schuller, to ask for advice and help, seemed too dangerous. Thinking over my hopeless situation, a funny idea occurred to me – why not take a room at the posh Elite Hotel, which was also the headquarters of the Arrow Cross people? I decided on the spur of the moment, to enter the lion’s den, like Daniel did. (to honour my biblical “ancestor” we gave one of my two grandsons the name Daniel twenty years later.)

The receptionist looked askance at me as I arrived alone, without any luggage. But I told him with the self-assurance of a would-be-citizen of the Third Reich that I was passing through Kassa on my way to Vienna – and I handed him over the document bearing the signature of the German consul and stamped with the swatiska.

“I presume, you have a room for me” I said to him “and I want a perfect night of rest...I do not wish to be disturbed. Probably there are several razzias during the night.”

“Oh yes, certainly there are” he responded “and if you do not wish to be woken up...”

“...I shall leave this document with you” I interrupted him “please show it to the policemen or arrow-cross patrol when they come and tell them that they should not disturb a VIP in transit to the Reich...”

He took the letter and gave the bell-boy the key to my room on the third floor. The elevator was out of order, I had to climb the stairs...but I was in a well-heated room with a bath-room at last. I must have spent a long time in the bath-tub, because I felt asleep in it and when I woke up from my sleep, the water was cold. I continued sleeping in the bed under an eiderdown, with two pillows under my head. I felt I was in heaven.

Instead of angels, however – a gang of scoundrels was living in this “heaven”. When I went into the breakfast room next morning, all the people sitting at the tables wore the uniform of the SS, with the exception of one group of civilians, who were sitting at a long table in a corner of the room. As I soon learned from their happy and loud conversation, they were the Arrow Cross leadership of the region – including a middle-aged man, called Gyarmathy, who was the főispán (Lord Lieutenant) of the country.

They were discussing the evacuation of Kassa and the region surrounding the town, as if the dismantling of the factories and dispatching their machinery to Germany were a bonus for the country. They exchanged stories about hidden “treasure troves” of flour, lard, sugar and other goodies which the peasants tried to save – but the Arrow Cross people outwitted them and seized everything “serving the Hungarian people” naturally...as the foodstuffs would be used to feed those who were leaving the country now...in order to return after the final victory, of course. I was sitting at my table – the only non-Arrow Cross, non-SS – with the feeling that a farce is being played out around me. After the battle of Stalingrad and the tragedy of the Hungarian Second Army at the River Don – did these people really think that tiny, weak Hungary would emerge from the war “victorious”? Were they deceiving

themselves...or were they just scoundrels enjoying their passing moment of “glory”, playing for time...even if it only lasted for a few weeks?

While I was drinking my ersatz-coffee and eating astonishingly fresh and crisp French rolls with it – I learned that they were just scoundrels.

One of the Arrow Cross “officials” showed his neighbour a piece of jewellery with pride. As far as I could see, it was a gold necklace with a locket. He opened the locket – and there must have been a portrait in it, because he laughed, and said: a pretty Jewess gave it to me of her own free will...for safekeeping till she returns.” The others laughed too. “She is now at Bergen-Belsen...hopefully.” Somebody said. “Or...to be more precise, she was...” Gyarmathy added meaningfully.

As I was paying my bill and rising from the table to leave, His Excellency waved towards me in a friendly manner: “Farewell, Doctor, good luck...”

The receptionist had probably informed the Arrow Cross about me. I bowed politely and mumbled an incomprehensible compliment: “be damned”. I went to the railway station and after waiting a few hours, I took the train to Bratislava.

While I was starting out on deadly – but winnable – game, my comrades were enclosed in dark, airless box-cars, on their way to the Mauthausen concentration camp.

Many years later I read a Hungarian Railway official’s. He was on duty in Kassa during the year 1944 and he noted all the trains carrying Jews to concentration camps, which started from or passed through Kassa. According to his report, 320 thousand Jews were sent to their deaths via Kassa. Those who absconded and tried to find a refuge in the town, were searched for and summarily executed – he added.

Le médecin malgré lui

The region of the Bakony Mountains was covered with deep snow when I arrived in the little village amidst forests and gentle hills. From Bratislava – where I heard the news that there was no way to return to Budapest, because the city was already surrounded by the Red Army and the siege of the city had begun – I travelled hitch-hiking on military trucks to Komárom and from there to Ácsteszér. We did the last twenty kilometres on foot. I use the plural, because by that time I was not alone: In Bratislava, while waiting for my entry visa at the Hungarian consulate, I made the acquaintance of a young man called Laci and we became friends in no time. He confided to me that he was a refugee too. He left Kassa to avoid the draft as he was of military age like myself – and he wanted to hide in a village in the Bakony Hills, where an uncle of his was living. He told me to accompany him. his uncle had no family he said and he would be happy to have me too.

It was not difficult to persuade me. I was at a deadlock: while it was out of question to return my home town, Vienna would be a death-trap: the German authorities would discover in no time that I was Jewish. The distant little village among the Bakony hills seemed a heavenly refuge to me.

The village – called Csatka – in fact proved to be a haven amidst the orgy of blood around. The thatched roofs of its houses were covered with snow, as we arrived there. A wooden sledge drawn by two horses was passing on the main street...two women wrapped in big black shawls were chatting in front of a house...It was an island of peace in the midst of a sea of war...or so I thought following my first impressions. Later on, however, I realized that there was no peace even in a village which seemed to be far away from the turmoils of war.

At Kisbér, in the neighbourhood of Csatka, the High Court of the Arrow Cross put up its headquarters – and executions were taking place there every day.

“They hang the people in such a way that they should suffer for as long as possible” somebody said furiously.

The wife of the physician at Sur, a village in the neighbourhood, was detained by the Arrow Cross people – the village notary told me, as I was handing him over my document to be registered as a temporary resident – she was accused of listening to the Hungarian bulletin of the BBC. She was arrested, taken to the forest and shot. The real reason was that she was of Jewish extraction – the notary told me confidentially. He was – by the way – neither pro-English, nor anti-German. He spoke fearfully of the Russians. There were rumours circulating that the soldiers of the advancing Red Army were raping women and stealing or looting. Their favourite loot was wrist-watches.

Nonetheless, the notary was happy because of my arrival. “Our physician was drafted and he left the village six months ago – he told me – since that time if somebody fell ill, we had to call the doctor at Sur.

“He is quite old, he can hardly walk twenty kilometres and now, that his wife has died...” He stopped for a minute then added: “It is very good to have you here, doctor,”

Thus I became a “medical doctor” – though I didn’t wish it at all. Luckily, however, the inhabitants of the village proved to be quite healthy. Days and weeks passed by and nobody asked me for medical help. We were living quietly in Father Elek’s house. To my great astonishment – Laci’s uncle –our host proved to be the parish priest of the village. A man in his early thirties, he was a Franciscan monk. As he told me later on, in 1792 Queen-Empress Marie Theresa donated about 200 acres of church land the Franciscan Order in the neighbourhood – and since that time the parish priest of Csatka was a Franciscan Monk, delegated by the Order.

Father Elek was of peasant stock. He was a young man in his early thirties with thick black hair, his sparkling brown eyes were full of wit and vigour. He was proud of his brothers,

who still tilled the land “at home”...in a village in Transdanubia. Later on I saw that he too was good at manual work...when the inhabitants of the village were obliged by a foolish order, to dig trenches against an eventual Russian advance in the region, Father Elek – though excepted – did the “compulsory digging” instead of an elderly man too weak to work.

Besides the digging of trenches life in the village was going on in its normal, peaceful way. Once a week a member of each family had the right to gather wood in the neighbouring forest which was the property of a baron. This was an ancient right – and a very useful one at that time because this way the village people could collect the firewood they needed, which they then carried home on sleighs. Even weddings took place – two were celebrated while I was there – according to old customs, the best man asked for the hand of the bride in verse, whereupon the father answered in prose and the mother wept. Then they went in a procession to the church, where the young couple was married by Father Elek. Wedding feast followed. As guest of Father Elek, both Laci and I were invited to these feasts, and we all enjoyed the savoury dishes “Bakony style”, with much sour cream and paprika.

The house Father Elek lived in was very much like the other modest houses of the village, only its roof was not thatched but tiled. There were three rooms in the house: one was used as Father Elek’s bedroom, the another was his chaplain’s Father Gyula’s bedroom, the third room was a study. Now that we were lodging there, the two monks shared a bedroom, while Laci and I slept in the other one. The study was mainly used by father Elek – he read and wrote there, quite often parishioners visited and had long confidential talks with him, discussing their problems, I assumed. There was also a kitchen and a big pantry full of food, which was much treasured in those times of rationing and scarcity. Smoked hams hung on the walls, there were big pieces of bacon, sacks full of white flour stood on the floor, there were also bags of sugar on the shelves...Aunt Margit an old widow, living in the neighbourhood, came every day, prepared hot meals and kept the house clean. It would have been a paradise

on earth, if the news of the executions at Kisbér and the murders committed by the Skull and Cross-Bones Brigade all around the region did not reach us almost everyday. I went to bed each evening with the secret wish not to wake up the next morning. It would be a blessing to die without pain...and not to be captured, tormented and hanged, I sighed before falling asleep.

A few days later my presentiment of evil came true. All of a sudden a car with insignia of the Wehrmacht stopped in front of our house and a German officer rang the bell. Aunt Margit opened the door – and a lieutenant entered, asking whether the “Herr Doktor” was at home.

I was shocked, of course, by the German Army’s knowledge of my presence there...If they got some information about me, they might also know about my background...I thought while the lieutenant entered. He was a young man, in his late twenties, with a blond beard around his face which – because he had no moustache – reminded me of portraits of Norwegian fishermen which I had seen in happier times.

“I am glad to meet you, Herr Kollege” the lieutenant said” our corps will leave tomorrow and I need your professional help.”

I was aghast. If he wants me to join their corps for some reason, I am finished. They will discover in no time that I am no doctor – and that I am a Jew.” Nonetheless, I tried to preserve my calm.

“I am ready to help you, Herr Lieutenant” I answered” but you will understand that I have to stay and to do my duty here...”

“I am a physician, and I just want to ask you to continue a treatment which I started a few weeks ago while we were staying here in the neighbourhood” he said earnestly “there is a girl of thirteen whom I diagnosed as having diabetes. I started giving her injections of insulin

and the therapy proved to be beneficial. Now that we are leaving, I am asking you continue the treatment.”

I had some experience with diabetes. An uncle, who lived with his family in, a small town on the Great Plain, had diabetes – and as I spent a few weeks almost every summer in his house, I saw him quite often injecting himself. I was sure that I could do it too.

“I would continue the treatment gladly, Herr Lieutenant – I said – just that as I am a refugee I have neither a syringe nor insulin with me...”

“I understand you perfectly well, Herr Doctor.” he said compassionately and he handed over a set of syringes and fials of insulin to me. “Just go on with the treatment, please.”

He left without showing any sign of suspicion. I was content that I was acting so well – but I was also somewhat frightened because of the responsibility I felt towards the ill child. The next day I walked over to the farm where the girl lived and administered the injection. I continued to do this during the weeks to come. The parents of the girl were well-to-do farmers. After my third visit they offered to take me home. When the horses stopped in front of our house, the farmer took a quarter of a pig from the rear of the car and started to carry it to the kitchen. My first idea was to refuse the “fee” – but then I changed my mind. After all – I was giving the girl the right treatment and I hoped to save her life. It was also a good feeling to be able to recompense Father Elek for his goodness – and for his hospitality.

The next unexpected visitors were more dangerous. From the car, which stopped in front of our house two henchmen of the Skull-and-Bones Brigade emerged. One of the two had a tommy gun and hand grenades tucked in his belt – the other was armed only with a revolver.

I was sorry that I had no cyanide with me – the best solution would be to die before they get me...I thought. However, without any poison at hand, I had to wait – and to greet them politely as they entered.

The big man with the revolver seemed to be in command.

“Are you the doctor, who we heard about?” he asked “They are talking a lot about you around here.”

“I have no knowledge of being a celebrity, sir” I answered “I am just a refugee...from the Bolsheviks.”

He looked at me suspiciously.

“Are you afraid of me?” he asked. “Do you perhaps believe the false rumours about us?”

“I did not hear any rumours” I answered with fake self-assurance, as I was sure that the stories I heard about their murders were unfortunately true.

“What would be your reaction if I told you that you must come with us?” he asked.

“I would comply with your wish sir” I answered and added – hoping that my voice would not tremble – “though I think that I should be allowed to stay here, at Csátka as I think I am needed here...”

He started to laugh.

“Well doctor, I was just joking!” he said “I ask you to come with us just for a short visit at Baron Pusztay’s house. His mother in law fell and broke her arm. You should take care of her ...after that we will take you home again.”

It was both good and bad news. They did seemingly not suspect that I was Jewish and that I was a fake doctor – this was the good news. To be obliged to help an old lady who has broken her arm...with my scarce first-aid experience which I picked up while I was a boy scout many years ago...that was the bad news. There was no way to hesitate however – I

took my coat and my bag with the syringes and I followed the two Skull and Bones guys. I hoped that my voice was not trembling as I said goodbye to Laci and Aunt Margit.

We took the highway leading to Baron Puszta's chateau – and later on to Ácsteszér. I thought that it would be deserted – but to my astonishment the highway was full of cars and pedestrians, fleeing towards the West. The Arrow Cross and the German propaganda worked: thousands left their homes hoping that they would return after the “Endsieg” – the final victory of Germany – to their homes.

Actually they were leaving their homeland with the moveables they could carry. All of a sudden Russian planes appeared and sprinkled the highway with their machine guns. They were called “rata”s because of the frightening rattle of their machine guns. –The cars stopped, everybody tried to find cover behind rocks and trees...the “ratas” returned several times and as they left those who started moving ahead. Half a dozen people did not move anymore.

The three of us, we remained unharmed but the two horses became nervous and the Skull and Bones man who was driving the horses had a lot of trouble keeping them on track.

After half an hour we took a right turn and on a winding, narrow road which was covered with snow, we arrived finally at Baron Puszta's chateau.

In fact, though it was called a chateau, it was in fact a country cottage which was used by the Puszta's as a summer resort – they had town-mansion at Székesfehérvár. They left the town at the right time – because Székesfehérvár became the first target of the offensive of the Russian army – somewhat later a counteroffensive was launched by the Germans...and the town changed hands three times. It was almost demolished and thousands of its citizens died.

The Puszta's in their chateau survived the difficult times unharmed – the heaviest blow they suffered was the old ladies accident which resulted in her breaking an arm. As I entered the chateau – accompanied by the headman of the Skull and Bones Brigade – a lady came forward to greet me.

In her early forties, she was elegantly dressed in a dark blue tailor-made suit and greeted me with the special sweetish-condescending smile of the Hungarian gentry.

“I am glad you came so soon, főrvos úr, she greeted me, promoting me to ‘Head Surgeon’ as a gesture of politeness. “Unfortunately my husband cannot come and greet you, he is somewhat indisposed today” she added.

It was sad, indeed, that I missed the Baron (whose indisposition might have caused by some brandy or wine) but my sadness changed into terror, as the Baroness continued:

“I returned a few months ago from Kiev – she said – I volunteered to do duty in a field hospital. I am a trained surgical nurse. I assisted many times in the operating theatre” she added with some pride.

My God – I sighed – if I just touch the arm of that old lady, the Baroness will immediately discover that I am no physician...and the Skull and Bones men being here, they may dispose of me immediately.

I was led to the old lady, who was sitting comfortably in an armchair. Her broken arm was bound tightly with gauze.

She smiled at me and said:

“I feel no pain Doctor. Zita gave me first aid and pain-killing pills.”

“ I tried to secure her arm with splints...I hope that you will agree, doctor.” the Baroness looked at me with the hauteur of a professional – or so I felt.

Like a stroke of lightning, all of a sudden, an idea came to mind...how could I act honestly and satisfy her pride at the same time.

“You did a magnificent job, Baroness” I said “I couldn’t have done it better. Consequently the best we can do is not to touch the splints and the binding...you should just take her to the Veszprém Hospital to have her arm X-rayed. If something has to be done...following the X-raying the surgeons will do it there.”

It proved to be the right answer. The Baroness was content, the old lady was content...even the Skull and Bone man forced a smile onto his face.

But the story was not yet ended.

“We have another request, doctor” the Baroness said “my daughter has some problem...I want you to discuss it with her.” She added discretely in a whisper that Ágnes had some difficulty with her periods and she was given some hormone injections....Would I examine her and give advice whether the administering of injections should be continued?

Ágnes was a pretty brunette, about sixteen or seventeen years old. She was somewhat frightened as she followed me to the neighbouring room where I was meant to examine her.

When we were alone, she asked me abruptly:

“Do you insist on examining me, doctor? I think it would be utterly superfluous.”

It was your mother’s idea...not mine” I said “If you don’t wish I do not insist, of course...”

“Well doctor” she said with a sign of relief “you must know something which I dared not to tell my mother. There is no point in my taking hormone...I am not ill at all. I am pregnant, that is it.”

She looked at me with a sweet smile.

“What should I do? she asked.

“Tell your mother the truth” I said. “She will take care of your problem – I added after a few seconds of silence - probably she would be happy to have a grandchild.”

It was unusual advice...at that time it was unheard of for girls to give birth to a child. Nonetheless, as I learned later by chance, Ágnes followed my advice – a healthy girl was born and the man she married, adopted the child.

The fortunate adventure with the Baroness was followed by a gruesome event a few days later.

By some secret channels Father Elek continuously received information about the events that happened in the region and now he got word of a mass murder which an Arrow Cross gang had committed allegedly “to avenge a partisan attack”. There was probably no such attack at all – in fact there was no partisan activity in that part of Western Hungary, which was still held by the Germans – but partisan attacks were used in more than one case as a pretext for cruel actions. The overall aim was to terrorize the population. The alleged partisan activity was used – in this case – to stage raids all over the region, to capture Jews in hiding, draft dodgers and eventually German soldiers who had absconded and found refuge in the houses of peasants of German extraction.

“You must leave the house for a few days” Father Elek told us “I heard that the patrols of the Arrow Cross do very thorough searches everywhere. They even peer into the smoke houses and the ice-pits.” (It was customary to cut ice at the lake during wintertime and store the ice in pits, for use in summer.)

I had a bad feeling. If we must leave the friendly house of Father Elek, the only place to hide was the forest; how could we survive in the forest for several days...or a week? It was freezing cold...fifteen to twenty degrees centigrade below zero...and even if there was enough wood it would be too dangerous to make a fire.

“I have a good hiding place in mind” Father Elek reassured us. “You will go to the shrine. The hermit will take care of you.”

I had already heard about the shrine, of course, I had even met the hermit when he visited the parsonage to collect some food and paraffin for his lamp. He was a kind of midget, with a long, grey beard, lively brown eyes – and he was deaf and dumb. He was affectionately called “Muki” by the villages.

Muki came soon for Laci and me. He helped us to carry the provisions which Aunt Margit gave us for the trip and we left the village in high spirits. We looked forward to

spending a few days in the forest where there were deer and roe-deer, even fallow-deer was sighted sometimes. After the monotonous stay in the village it was a welcome change. There wasn't the faintest inkling of danger in our minds.

After struggling forward for an hour or two in the deep snow, we arrived on the outskirts of the forest. The Bakony Hills are famous for their thick forests – there are even folk-songs about the “betyárs” – the outlaws – hiding in the dense forests of the Bakony. Probably because it was winter – the legendary forest did not seem dense at all. From the fringe of the forest the shrine down in the valley was clearly visible. It consisted of a little chapel and a crucifix. There were also row of wooden benches all around – the valley looked like an amphitheatre surrounded by the forest. It was empty at that time, of course – but many years later when I visited the Csátka sanctuary in peacetime – it was full of pilgrims. The Csátka Sanctuary is usually visited on the Day of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary by the faithful many gypsies among them.

Muki introduced us to his little hut beside the chapel. It was a peculiar feeling to see the home of Muki, the living anachronism: the place where he lived was not much more comfortable than the caves hermits used to live in the past. There was no bed in it – Muki slept on a sheepskin on the floor, the greatest luxury of civilization he enjoyed was a paraffin lamp. He cooked his simple food on a stove using brushwood which he collected in the forest. He took his vocation as a hermit very seriously – he prayed silently and meditated for hours. When he was not praying or meditating he tried to communicate by special sign-language mimicking and making expressive gestures with his hands. We understood each other quite well. We spent the days either in Muki's hut, or wandering in the forest. Laci was a useful companion: he used to accompany his father on hunting trips and he learned a lot about tracking slots of roe-deer, or foot-marks of wild bear and hare...It was a good pastime to follow the tracks...and to find the places where salt and hay used to be deposited by foresters

in happier times. From our hiding place, we could observe the animals which frequently appeared...though they found neither salt, nor hay there any more.

The days passed quickly – but the nights were unbearably long and unpleasant. We did not sleep in Muki's hut – but in the chapel. There were many rugs there – and using the rugs we made a kind of bed which was also a hiding place. It would have been much better to spend the night in Muki's warm hut, even if there was not enough space for three...but Father Elek advised us strongly to sleep – and to hide – in the chapel. Without saying so, I think, deep in his soul, he believed that the shrine would somehow protect us. And in fact, it did.

A few days later it was a beautiful winter morning. The snow was sparkling in the sunshine there was some mildness in the air – a presentiment of spring approaching touched me, like a godly promise of irrational happiness.

Laci and I were sitting on one of the wooden benches, enjoying the early sunshine, Muki was a few metres away, doing the cleaning in his hut.

All of a sudden, we heard human voices from the upper part of the valley. The two of us – Laci and I – immediately started running to the chapel. I waved to Muki to hide too, because I was sure that a patrol of the Arrow own was coming, but he just smiled as if to say that there was no point in hiding and continued his work calmly.

From our hiding place in the chapel we did not see anything – we only heard the voices of the Arrow Cross people, who tried to cross-examine Muki.

Why was he hiding? With his long beard, was he perhaps a rabbi?

Rabbi or not...he is certainly a Jew” I heard one of the Arrow Cross people saying” show us your farok (penis) you wretched goblin!” I heard another voice saying.

Muki did not answer. Though he was deaf and dumb, he understood the situation perfectly well, and I think, he could have saved his life by trying to cooperate...after all, he was able to communicate. I even remember that somehow he could tell us a joke this way.

But he did not wish to cooperate. He did not even want to save his life. I am convinced that he had the feeling that by his refusal...and death...he might save Laci and me.

“To hell with this farok...” I heard a voice of another Arrow Cross man “I am fed up with inspecting hideous tools...He is Jewish and that is that.”

We heard a shot... and another one a few seconds later.

“Let us have a look in the chapel” somebody said.

“We’ve finished off the old Jew...let us hurry on” another voice answered...”I am not very fond of churches” he added, laughing.

And then they left.

Some time after the raid we returned to Csatka village and a couple of quiet days followed. The Germans left, the Arrow Cross and the Skull and Bones Brigade disappeared into thin air, we were in no-man’s land for a while. Then the Russians appeared. They did not come with tanks and armour, neither did they make a mass assault, as we imagined. There would two or three infantrymen just walk in, quietly, with kalashnikovs hanging loosely on their shoulders.

They asked for wrist watches and when they received some, they disappeared, continuing their westward march.

Then others appeared...and in few days all wristwatches were gone. I was luckier than most – because I had sold my Movado for a pair of boots earlier to a German tank soldier called Hans, who spent the nights in a neighbouring house before their withdrawal.

Now my Movado was rolling towards the inevitable Armageddon – but I was liberated. My troubles were over.

Or so I thought.

Wandering with gypsies

Just two days after the Russians arrived, I left the village – hoping to get home, to Budapest. There were no trains, no buses, of course – the war had not ended yet; the fighting went on around Szombathely, Sopron and other towns in the westernmost part of Hungary. Everybody – Father Elek included - tried to persuade me to stay but I was obstinate. I did not know what had happened to my family in Budapest, there were news about the famine which had killed thousands of people in the ghetto, the torture and killing of people in the “Arrow Cross Houses” the massacres on the banks of the Danube. I decided to try to go home – even if I had to walk the whole distance from the Bakony Hills to Budapest.

It took just two or three hours – and unfortunately I had to admit that I was wrong and those who wanted me to stay, were right.

Near Ácsteszér village, a Russian soldier stood at the crossroads. He told me to stop – and as far as I could understand his Russian – he asked me where I come from and whether I was not a “nemecki” soldier in civilian clothes.

I tried to explain to him that I was a Hungarian Jew – consequently I could not have been a German soldier. As I knew the Russian word for Jewish – I repeatedly told him that I was a “yevrey”. I was not very successful with this: he became even more hostile; several times he mumbled a word which meant – I assume – that I was a spy. He detained me on the spot: I had to hand over my belt and my shoes and he escorted me to a peasant house – which as I soon learned, had been temporarily transformed into a military command. I was however, not introduced to the house. I was ordered to sit down on a bench in front of the house, all my belongings were taken from me and a sentinel was posted there to guard me.

I was sitting there peacefully, hoping that in no time I would be allowed to continue my wandering – when an elderly peasant lady appeared.

“Young man” she said in a friendly manner “please, give me your coat. My husband needs it very much.”

I was taken aback.

“My dear woman, I need it too...” I answered “the weather is still too chilly...”

“You won’t need it” she answered unsentimentally “the other man, who was sitting there on the bench a few hours ago, is already buried.”

I could not believe my ears. I had not heard till then of the Russian “spy-scare”. But soon I was reminded of the mortal danger I was in.

An officer in a dark blue uniform appeared, and began something like a chat. He spoke the special German idiom which I knew well – because my comrades of Carpatho-Ukrainian descent in the slave labour camp, talked a very similar idiom: a mixture of Yiddish, German and Polish. I looked at the Russian officer – he could have been one of my cousins, the sons of Jenő bácsi and Aunt Helen, whom he married in Bucharest. He was a tall man, with black hair, an oval face and an ironic smile around his lips. I was sure he was Jewish.

“Who are you and where do you want to go?” he asked me “how come you are not wearing uniform?”

His voice was quite friendly – human – I would say. I had the immediate feeling that only the compassion of this man could save my life. So I started to tell him my story – the forced labour at the front line, my days and nights at Kassa, my miraculous escape at Csátka. I had family photos with me: I showed him the photos of my parents, of my marriage in the “Heroes’ Synagogue” at Dohány utca, the portrait of my young wife, Noemi.

He took the photos, looked at them for a long time and then returned them, silently.

“ I have survived all this – I added – and now you, the Russians who I thought would liberate me, plan to execute me as a spy?”

He did not answer, just put his hand on my shoulder, then turned round and disappeared.

After half an hour the guard took me to the peasant house.

As I entered, I saw several officers – maybe eight or ten – sitting around a table which was so long that it stood in two communicating rooms.

I stood in front of them, barefoot, holding my trousers with my two hands – for lack of my belt.

The Jewish officer was not there.

The officers were sitting there silently, they did not even look at me.

All of a sudden, the Jewish officer entered, with a little box in one hand and a glass of water in the other one.

I recognised the little box: I used to keep bicarbonate of soda in it, which I used against heartburn.

The officer came to me and asked – somewhat theatrically: “Do you dare to take some of this white powder?”

After this announcement he handed over the box and the glass of water to me.

Now I began to understand the situation. They found the bicarbonate of soda as they searched my bag and – following the age old tradition – they immediately assumed that I was about to “poison the wells” of the region.

“Of course I will” I answered gallantly, and poured the entire content into the glass of water. Following this, I started drinking...

The officers did not wait till I finished drinking: without saying a word, they stood up from the table and left. Probably they thought: if it was poison, I would die. If it was just bicarbonate of soda – well...then...

“Here are your shoes and your belt” the officer in the dark blue uniform whispered to me. And now leave as fast as you can.

He lead me to a side-entrance of the house and showed me the direction: “Just run...and don’t look back!” he said.

I followed his advice, and ran.

*

After an hour or two of marching on a road meandering between the Bakony Hills, I saw a group of Gypsies camping in a clearing a few steps from the road. They were a colourful bunch of people: some middle-aged men in the customary dark suits of gypsy musicians in city cafés and restaurants, a young man wearing boots feeding two horses and talking to the animals as if they were human beings...an old man in rags, a number of women, one or two gypsy beauties, with sparkling brown eyes and long black hair only partially hidden by colourful searves...a “house on wheels” which probably used to belong to a circus-caravan – it was painted blue with an inscription “Madame Cassandra the Fortune Teller” (Kasszandra jósnő) on its side. The horses, which used to pull it, were grazing unharnessed nearby, an old woman was sitting in front of the caravan, peeling potatoes.

“Hey, young man come here for a minute and I shall tell you fortune” she shouted to me “why are you in such a hurry?” she added laughing “our girls are prettier than yours...

I stopped and approached her. As I came nearer I discovered that perhaps she was not as old as she seemed at first sight. Her face was wrinkled, but there was fire and wit in her eyes.

“Thank you very much, Cassandra but I am more interested in the fortune of my family than in my own. I do not know if any of my people are still alive...”

It may sound strange that all of a sudden I was confiding my innermost fear to this unknown woman – but I felt instinctively a sympathy, which I very often feel for Roma people...my sympathy for the Gypsies originates from early childhood. The house in Népszínház utca where we were living with my parents and my younger sister was not far from Mátyás tér (square) which at that time was a kind of Budapest “Harlem” – a neighbourhood where mainly Gypsies lived. The secondary school called “Zrínyi Miklós reálgimnázium” of which I was a student, was near Mátyás tér, and every day, from nine to seventeen years of age, I had to cross the square twice a day: going to and from school. Together with my schoolmates we not only crossed it – we stopped frequently to eat ice cream produced by an Italian pastrymaker on the corner of Tavaszmező street and Mátyás tér, to play football with Gypsy boys, sometimes to be invited to a Roma home for lunch...

The Gypsies living around Mátyás square were Hungarian-speaking “romungros” – for most of them, Hungarian was their mother tongue though many of them spoke Romany too.

I had a number of Roma friends – and I was fascinated by their sympathy for my Jewishness. In those times of open anti-Semitism, Mátyás square with my gypsy friends was an oasis for me. The Gypsies in Hungary were not yet officially persecuted. They were all Roman Catholics, and the so-called “Jewish Laws” were directed only against people of the Jewish faith. Yet, as they were members of a people persecuted for centuries, they had instinctively in their bones, fear and sympathy for those who were persecuted. Also I liked

their music – and their attachment to music – very much. There was a sharp contrast between my two piano lessons a week from Aunt Irene, a tall, haggard lady with elegant manners – and their passionate love of music. I was sometimes allowed to attend music lessons in a big, seemingly desolate room in a gypsy house – which was immediately filled with music and laughter as the old Roma teacher played melodies on his violin – and the boys attending the “course” tried to follow his example, playing the same melody on their violins. There were no musical scores, no “metronome” to define the rhythm...they had to play by ear...and to repeat the melody for the umpteenth time ...until the teacher was satisfied...

All these memories came into my mind, as I followed Madame Cassandra and entered her caravan.

There was semi-darkness inside. Black curtains hung in front of the windows, there was a floating wick on the table, I felt some aromatic smoke in the air.

Madame Cassandra offered me a seat and she put her tarot cards in front of me on the table.

I cannot remember the specific cards – but I do remember that she put down cards forming a cross, then picked two or three of them, and looked at me saying:

There are two messages for you in these cards. A good one and a bad one. Do you want to hear them?”

I nodded.

“The good one is that your loved ones are alive. They survived in the ghetto and were not deported.”

“Tell me the bad one too” I asked.

“If you continue on your way now, you will be taken as a prisoner to Siberia. So stay with us, please!”

After my experience with the Russians and the killings, rapes and other atrocities I heard about later on, I consider her warning advice founded on reliable information.

Also there was another logical reason for this proposition: there were many more Roma women than men there...and the majority of men were middle aged or old...while I was young.

“Do you think that your people would allow me to stay with you?” I asked Madame Cassandra.

She looked at me condescendingly.

“Of course they will” she answered “after they are told that you are one of us.”

“You will have to tell them that I am Jewish, Madame Cassandra” I whispered.

“I knew that you were one of the sons of Abraham the minute I saw you on the road,” she said. “It’s precisely because of this I shall tell them that you are one of us.”

As I looked at her, I discovered that Cassandra’s eyes were not just black – there were shining yellow stars in their blackness...

This is how I became a temporary member of the Romungro tribe – which was wandering at that time towards the Eastern parts of the country, in order to be as far away as possible from Germans.

“In Győr, our home town – Sára, a woman in her late twenties told me – hundreds of gypsies were arrested and deported we do not know where.”

Sára’s husband, Lajos a slim, good looking man in an elegant black suit, was a violinist in a Gypsy band at Győr.

“We were playing that evening as usual in the “Hattyú” restaurant – he said – and about midnight the owner of the place came to us and told Józsi, the *prímás* that we should disappear as soon as possible, together with our families because there would be a police raid

and all the Gypsies living in the town would be arrested and handed over to the Germans for deportation.

I was told by Lajos that the owner of the restaurant called Stadlmayer, was one of the many burghers of the town of German descent. When Hungary was occupied by the Wehrmacht, in March 1944 his grandson was declared “Volksdeutsch” and was forced to join the SS instead of the Hungarian army. After this event Mr. Stadlmayer started hating the Nazis. As the owner of a popular restaurant, he had good connections – it is possible, he got the news of the imminent raid from one of his regular customers working for the police.

“I hurried home – Lajos said – picked up Sára the kids, the suitcases and in less than an hour we were on our way in this coach.”

He pointed at a black coach standing nearby – it was one of the “konflis” coaches still in use in most Hungarian towns at that time. Their coachmen, the “konfliskocsisok” were characteristic figures of the urban landscape: most of them were regulars in one or other pub and their clients knew where to find them. They were also messengers – they carried perfumed love-letters to their addresses, their coaches were hiding places for amorous couples who had no place to go: their secret meetings often took place under the black canopy of a “konflis”.

The coachmen who helped Lajos’s family to leave the town, was a Gypsy himself...now he was there too, sitting in his coach and meditating whether it had been worthwhile to leave his home. Sára also had doubts. “Who would care about a Roma who plays the double-bass” she asked in tears, “just recently we bought beautiful nice new furniture for the children’s room.”

The Roma people have the same fixation as we Jews used to have – I discovered hearing her pitiful remark – we called this the “Recamier syndrome”. Most of the Hungarian Jews who did not leave the country though they had a presentiment of the approaching

disaster – remained because they did not have the moral strength to leave their jobs and their comfortable homes with a bed, called “récamier” inside it. The lovely and witty Madame Récamier did not know – when she created (or asked a cabinet-maker to create) her famous bed, that after two centuries it would become the symbol of conservative stupidity.

The coachman confided to me that he got orders to fetch the family and leave town with them from the vajda whose name he did not know. I had the feeling that he knew exactly what the name of the mysterious head of the tribe was, but was not allowed to tell anybody. Later on I got some information: the vajda was an elderly “roma”, without any permanent home, because he was always on the move, visiting the members of the tribe who lived scattered all over the country.

At that time he was far away wandering eastwards with another group, but his orders somehow reached us from time to time. Just now we were asked to make a detour to avoid meeting some Russian military units which were said to be extremely ferocious after suffering big losses in an ambush. He also sent word, “to take special care of the women... if possibly to hide them when meeting the gorgios.”

Nonetheless I did not perceive any sign of fear among the Romas. From time to time Russian troops marched on the nearby road; they were not hostile at all, on the contrary, it seemed that they liked “us” Gypsies. “Tziganki...Tziganki!” they cried and waved and smiled. One of the Russians however, noticing my white skin, started to shout at me: “Nye Tzigan...nye tzigan”. I do not know what might have happened if my Gypsies had not stood in front of me and shouted back: “Da...da...tzigan! Yes...yes...he is Gypsy”

Fortunately the Russians did not stop...and the incident was soon forgotten.

In the meantime a lunch was prepared.

Madame Cassandra directed the operation, Sára and two or three young women did the cooking.

They took some chicken from a nearby cart. "They are fresh" Kati, a pretty girl of fourteen or fifteen tried to assure me. "We collected them recently."

She told me, that they arrived at a farm after a Russian unit had left. The soldiers probably shot all the chickens they found there – but there were too many, or some of the chickens though shot, had the strength to run away...and were not found. Roma women collected the dead chickens left behind by Russians and thanks to their resourcefulness we were about to have a princely lunch.

As you will read in another chapter, during a later period of my life I became a king chronicler of a regular gastronomy and enjoyed refined dishes of some of the best restaurants of the world...Here I must admit that the preparation of the gypsy-bouillon did not follow the rules of haute cuisine. After the feathers and the entrails were removed, the chickens were put into a cauldron, salt and pepper was added and the mixture of poultry, spices and onions was cooked without any other intervention over an open fire. From time to time an unappetizing ring of foam appeared around the inner side of the cauldron – it was removed with a spoon and the cooking went on undisturbed.

Finally, however an acceptable chicken-soup was produced. I was given a big can full of soup and some giblets and I consumed it with delight and very fast as I had not eaten anything for twenty four hours.

"You seem to like the Gypsy soup" Madame Cassandra said smiling "now I am sure my tarot cards told me the truth and you will stay with us for good."

I did not say yes or no. I had the feeling that if I continued on my way alone, in one way or other I would perish: there would not be another Russian officer in a dark blue uniform to save me.,

"You will feel better than you Leverfelt-before.". Madame Cassandra added "the kiss of a Roma girl is one spoon of sugar sweeter than that of other women".

Maybe she was right. Never in my life did I feel again the feminine sweetness and the rapturous fire of Gypsy love.

During the weeks I spent wandering with them, Madame Cassandra confided some secrets. She related that Terike, a not very pretty woman in her thirties had succeeded in luring her “chosen man” away from his wife, using a love beverage. “Though you could have no use for it, because it produces an effect only on men, I will reveal the recipe to you” she said laughing. “Add to a cup of coffee two spoonfuls of ground cinnamon, five cloves, some vanilla and one teaspoon of mace. The solution must be filtered through a nightshirt worn for two nights, finally add a pinch of maybeetle-powder to the mixture – and it is ready for use.”

I did not need a miraculous potion anyway, because during the third day of my stay with the Romungros, I became an instant hero for the Gypsy women.

About six o'clock we saw a big farm near the road. It seemed to be deserted. Though most peasants did not listen to the propaganda which tried to persuade them to flee to “Festung Deutschland” – “Fortress Germany” from where they would return after the final victory of the “undefeatable army”... some of the farmers were intimidated and left Hungary. We assumed that the deserted farm in front of us was one of these, which were left by both the owners and the farm-hands.

After a few minutes of hesitation, our carts started moving and we entered the big courtyard of the farm. Only Madame Cassandra's wagon stopped outside in front of the gate. She had a bad premonition - as she told me later on.

The empty courtyard was surrounded by sheds, stables, cow-sheds and other buildings. It “was part of an estate – there were big estates there belonging to some of the richest aristocrats in Transdanubia – I assumed that the farm belonged to one of them.

Some of the men jumped down from their carts to look around in the sheds and stables. They hoped to find live animals, sheep and cows first of all, because these were in most cases left behind for lack of trucks.

What happened during the following minutes, remained in my memory as a nightmare.

When “Uncle” Gyuri opened the door to enter the biggest shed, all of a sudden Russian soldiers swarmed out of the shed like ants, in gray uniforms. A drinking bout had probably been taking place inside because all of them were drunk. As they perceived the women in the carts, they started shouting and running towards them. The women did their best to hide and when the soldiers reached them, they held on, as they could, so as not to be dragged down... There was no doubt in my mind that in spite of their resistance, they would be raped soon... if nothing happened. Because... I am sorry to say the men did not move to defend their women. I even heard one of them muttering “why not let them do what they want ... it does no harm.”

That is when I began to understand why Gypsy society is a matriarchy. The women fought back vigorously, none of them gave in.

I quickly came to a decision. These were drunk privates – I thought – but there must be some responsible officer around.

I jumped from the cart, and started running towards what seemed to be an office building... I thought that it might be the place where the commanding officer might be staying. While running, I shouted: “Ofyicer ... ofyicer ... idgyi suda! (Officer, officer, come here)

Nobody came until I got to the office building. Through the dirty window I saw two officers inside sitting at a table in shirt-sleeves and drinking.

I opened the door and went-in.

They looked at me as if I were a ghost, as I tried to communicate that they should intervene to stop something which, in my innocence, I thought to be an affront against the honor of a great army.

Probably surprised by my unexpected appearance, the two stood up and – staggering - started to follow me as I tried to lead them towards the carts. Both of them were laughing and gesticulating with their hands and shouting something which must have been so funny that the soldiers stopped dragging the women for a moment and shouted back, laughing.

There is probably a thousand-year-old instinct in the Roma soul which rings a bell when it is the right time to flee. Before I could realize the full meaning of what was going on, the horses were whipped on, and the men ran after following the carts, I joined them and I no time we left the farm, to disappear in the approaching twilight. Madame Cassandra in her caravan followed at a comfortable pace. She had been cautious enough not to enter the farm... and above all, she was old. She was not afraid of being raped.

After about an hour, we stopped at a clearing. We put up the tents in the middle of a forest of beech-trees... one of those forests, which I like most. I liked their loose light-green foliage which allowed the sunshine and the silvery ribbon of a brook meandering under the trees... It was early spring but the air was mild, it was like midsummer dream.

After my successful intervention, I was granted a tent of my own by Madame Cassandra who seemed to be the head woman of the group... “You will not be there alone for a long time” she said meaningfully.

She was right this time too. We were sitting around the fire, eating robber’s meat (rablókús), pieces of meat and bacon on a spit and roasted over the fire .. there was also some white wine as sour as vinegar, but wine nonetheless ... and I was chewing the last piece of pork when little Kati who was until then sitting silently at the fire, turned to me and asked unexpectedly:

“Do you like me, Zoli bácsi?

I was shocked. I was then in my mid-twenties and she was a teenager (as we would say nowadays) I did not feel old enough to be called “bácsi” or “uncle”.

“Why do you ask this silly question” I retorted “I like you all... this is why I am staying with you.”

There were tears in her eyes, she was almost sobbing. “I asked this because I wanted to know whether you do especially like me. Aunt Cassandra told me to ask... “she broke off the sentence suddenly-

As I looked at her, I discovered a curious change: she was not a little girl anymore ... she reminded me of the “Gypsy Aphrodite” the painting by an unknown artist which I had seen in the Prado.

To ask what? I mumbled

“Whether you would allow me to sleep in your tent. Well... you see.. there is Karcsi and Gyuri and Juli and Rosi, my brothers and sisters, and of course my Mom this way there are too many of us and you are alone..”

“And what would your mother say? Would she allow you to?”

“Of course she would” she laughed “she told me that she did the same, when she was as old as I am now. “She stopped for a moment and then added, timidly:

“Cassandra told me that perhaps you will get fond of me even love me..”

I got really fond of Kati. I even fell in love with her smooth, hot, creole skin with her Gypsy-Madonna-like beauty, with her sincere, uncomplicated passion when we made love. Kati had already had sex before she met me – and she knew much more about sexual intimacy than I did. At that time girls of the Budapest were sexually “out of bounds” for us boys.. only innocent kisses and some petting were allowed.. the sexual initiation of the boys of the Budapest middle class happened in elegant brothels like that of Madame Frida in Magyar-

street, or with servant girls during buried, secret encounters. Kati's openness, her instinctive feminine drive to attain orgasm were decisive discoveries for me... I felt like I was living in a dream and never wanted to wake up.

While wandering towards the East, I also spent unforgettable hours sitting in Madame Cassandra's caravan. I do not know whether she attended any school during her youth – but the experiences of a long life, natural intelligence and profound meditation, made her one of the wisest people I ever met. “You must learn how to love” she told me “I feel some coldness in your heart... if it does not dissolve, you won't ever be happy.”

Looking back at my long life, I think she might have been right.

Cassandra also told me that during the years before the war, she spent some time with gitanos in Spain and also in France... they went on a pilgrimage to Les.Saintes.Maries, where – according to the legend – Sarah the Egyptian maid landed with the “two Marias” – Aunts of Jesus Christ – after their flight from the Holy Land. Cassandra was also knowledgeable about Roma – history. She told me the name of the Sinti tribe which fled from Northern India and wandered through the Middle East to Europe: they were the ancestors of today's Roma: when they arrived in Europe, they declared themselves Christian fugitives from Egypt ...this is why they were called “Gypsies”...

I knew this part of the story more or less. What Cassandra told me about the sexual attitudes her people was much more interesting. The discretion, absolutely not to talk about sexual matters, for instance. The girls are not told anything about menstruation in advance – when they get their first bleeding, and tell their mothers what is happening – they are told to keep quiet, and conceal their panties while drying .. no male member of the family must know about it, or see it.

She talked about marriage customs.. In many cases they were pre-arranged by the parents, when the children were seven or eight years old. They were not obliged to follow suit as adults, but interestingly, a number of marriages were still concluded in this way.

“Are you rich?” she asked unexpectedly “ I assume you are. Most Jews are well-to-do “

“I never was” I answered “and I do not know whether anybody in my family is still alive.”

“I am sorry that I asked you this question” Cassandra apologized,” anyway it does not matter. If you do not have the money to pay for the bride, you will elope. “She continued to explain that normally the groom has to pay for the bride... if he did not have the money he eloped with the bride. “You must not think that you will offend Kate’s mother by doing this” she tried to reassure me “it is just symbolic. They will attend the wedding feast after the elopement peacefully and in good spirits.

I tried to tell her that - though I was quite young – I was married and I did not want to commit bigamy.

She hushed me,

“There will be no notary present at your wedding in a Roma camp” she said laughing, “and you will be happy” she added softly.

A long silence followed. I was thinking about the fate of my family: I had got word earlier, that the Budapest Jews had been forced to move to a ghetto, there were continuous killings and many thousands were deported. Budapest was bombed by the allied Air Force, since Christmas-time the Red Army was besieging the City, heavy fighting took place on the streets. There was not much hope that I would find anybody alive.

“I must leave you to return to my family – I said – they might be sick and need my help.

“Kati is young and healthy – I added - ... she will not miss me very much, I am sure”.

In fact I missed her very much. Before I left, Kati's mother decided to leave us and join another group headed by the vajda. She probably thought it safe because they were wandering about twenty kilometers to the east of us further away from the hills where the battles were still taking place.

At the last minute Kati asked me to stay with her and to leave together with them – but with great sadness I said no.

I spent the next few days mostly in Madame Cassandra's caravan... and as we arrived at Székesfehérvár, I came to a decision. Though I had not had very good experiences with the Russian military to put it mildly – I thought that there might be some people in this important town (which had previously changed hands three times between the Wehrmacht and the Red Army) who would be intelligent enough to understand my situation.

I said goodbye to my Gypsy friends and in the centre of the town I succeeded in finding the Russian command. A captain listened attentively to my story, prepared a kind of hand written laissez passer which – he told me – allowed me to hitchhike on Russian trucks. With the note in my hand I asked the drivers of or three military trucks parked in front of the command: finally one of the drivers told me that they had orders to proceed to Budapest.

I immediately boarded the truck, and I was sitting on its platform. while it was driving at a “terrible speed” (maybe 50 kilometres per hour) towards Budapest.

In two or three hours we arrived at the Buda side of the capital City... and when the truck stopped for some reason at Török street, which was near the my sister's home, I left the truck without saying goodbye.

In half an hour I was ringing the bell at the gate at Kavics-street 9, a villa where my sister and her family used to live on the first floor.

Nobody answered.

I rang the bell of the neighbor who lived on the ground floor.

Doctor Gerber, a dental surgeon appeared at the gate. He looked at me as if I were a ghost.

“Lilly (i.e. my sister) and your mother were taken to the ghetto” he said but they are alive I hope. your father –I am sorry to say, - is dead.”

He invited me to spend the night in their home. “It is too dangerous to cross the pontoon bridge the moment “he said” the Russian guards pick up many young men on the bridge. They need prisoners of war. In their official bulletin they announced they had a hundred and fifty thousand prisoners during the siege of Budapest... and in fact they took much fewer than that.”

I accepted the invitation and spent the “first night of freedom” at Doctor Gerber’s home.

My mother's story

She was petite, with warm brown, eyes always with a timid, smile around her lips ... though she had brought up two children, managed a big household... and for many years had also managed in fact the family firm called somewhat boastingly. The Phoenix chocolate factory.” My father was the boss, but my mother was the leading spirit. She designed chocolate figures of Santa Claus, she invented the chocolate “Sitting Rabbit” which became the most popular chocolate figure for Easter. After the Jewish Laws were introduced and the factories owned by Jews received less and less sugar, and cocoa beans .. and later none at all... she tried to find “ersatz” basic material, and succeeded in maintain training production until the Germans took over Hungary, the Jews were forced into the ghetto and “Phoenix” could not continue producing chocolate anywhere.

Fortunately Doctor Gerber knew her address in the ghetto, and the next morning, I crossed the temporary bridge over the Danube hoping against hope to find her alive.

All the bridges were destroyed by the Wehrmacht.. with the vain hope of preventing the Red Army from crossing the Danube from the Pest side, which they had already occupied on the 18th of January, 1945, to the Buda side, which was defended by the Germans and their Hungarian allies until the 3th of February, 1945.

The temporary bridge which I had to cross, was constructed by Russian soldiers, using military pontoons. Just as Doctor Gerber predicted, there were military guards at each bridgehead, they controlled the stream of pedestrians crossing the bridge. They stopped young men at random and some of them were taken as “prisoners of war” – to verify the number of prisoners indicated in the bulletins of the Russian High Command.

It was a deadly game of roulette for me, as I was of military age. Fortunately I succeeded in hiding behind a woman carrying a big basket and the guard did not stop me. I crossed the bridge and arrived safely in Pest.

Near the bridge I hardly recognized the big block of flats at Szent István körút (boulevard) No.2. Previously it was inhabited by well-to-do citizens of the Lipótváros district, now there were no windows left unharmed, the façade of the building wore the heavy scars of bombs and mines.

“This was one of the Arrow Cross Houses – somebody mumbled. “Hundreds of people were tortured and killed there.”

Looking at the house I had an indescribable feeling.. it must have been a premonition with hindsight: soon I was to hear that my mother was kept prisoner, tortured and almost executed there a few weeks before.

The Great Boulevard, which used to be one of the main arteries of the city was now empty. The rows of eclectic houses built at the turn of the century – which used to remind me of Paris boulevards – were in ruins. There were no yellow street-cars, no blue buses.. just pedestrians. Some of them were pulling small carts loaded with their belongings. Some were carrying big bundles in their hands. They were probably returning to their homes which they had been forced to leave during the siege of the city, I thought with some optimism.

I became less optimistic as I arrived at Dob-utca which, during the German occupation, was a street in the ghetto.

Haggard faces, ruins, hand-written notes on the walls, asking for members of families and friends who had disappeared. Anybody who knows about their whereabouts should inform us immediately, please.. they pleaded.

In some cases “disappearance” might have been a euphemism for being killed. Doctor Gerber talked about thousands murdered or starved to death in the ghetto. We had already

heard in the labor camps that the inhabitants of Budapest – and its suburbs Pesterzsébet, Pestszentlőrinc, Kispest, Újpest and others were deported before the siege of Budapest began. Soon, however, I heard about a miraculous escape. I hardly recognized my old friend, László Urbán, coming towards me in Wesselényi street as he greeted me with a cheerful: hallo.

“Glad to see you” he cried “I heard that your company had been deported...”

A tall, forceful man, a few years younger than me, László was not looking old, with a haggard, pale face.

Though I was in a hurry I stopped to listen to his incredible story.

“We were doing forced labor at Hatvan – he said – and before our company was deported, I succeeded in escaping with a few comrades and we managed to get to Budapest. We entered the ghetto and being a printer, I immediately found an important job: I started working in the printing shop which produced all kinds of life-saving “documents”. When there was no work I helped my ex-comrades, who were working in the fire brigade. There was much to do because there were frequently fires in the ghetto – the Arrow Cross gangs which entered the ghetto from time to time to rob and kill, in many cases set the burglarized flats on fire.

“During one such ambush, I was wounded in the abdomen. I was in pain but I did not faint. Thus I could see and hear what followed. Two of my comrades picked me up and carried me while some of the Arrow Cross people were still shooting – to the “ghetto hospital” which was set up just here in Wesselényi Street, in a Jewish Primary School building.

“They took me to the main floor where the “operating theatre” was installed in one of the class rooms.”

“There were two people lying on mattresses or on the floor there – waiting for surgeon as Dr László Taubner appeared in the door of the classroom. He was only in his early thirties

but already a great surgeon .. and a great man. He examined the three of us.. and after the examination pointing at me, he said: "This is the most urgent case.

"My comrades carried me into the "operating theatre" – there were two tables put together, covered with some white linen which I thought were bed sheet. There was an electric bulb hanging over the table .. and Doctor Taubner had a scalpel in his hand, when I lost consciousness. When I woke up, I was lying on a mattress in another classroom. and the other guy who was lying near me, told me that Doctor Taubner had operated on my liver, performing one of the most complicated surgical operations without any of the modern medical appliances ... he saved my life."

Many years after this conversation in the "Vienna Coffeehouse" of the Forum Hotel I met Doctor Taubner who was visiting in Budapest. After the war he emigrated to the U.S. and he was living in Washington D.C. a well-known surgeon there. I mentioned the name of László Urbán to him and he immediately remembered his case. I gave him László's phone number and a memorable meeting between Doctor Taubner and his patient, whose life he had saved in the ghetto, took place a few days afterwards.

Let us get back, however, to the recently liberated ghetto, in March, 1945. After I said goodbye to László, I continued on my way towards No. 23. Dohány street, where – according to the information from Doctor Gebner – my mother tried to find refuge. It was a terrifying homecoming. Klauzál Square which used to be the center of the Jewish quarter of Pest had become a cemetery, where hundreds of dead bodies were buried temporarily. The kosher butcher shop and the diner, as well as the many little shops around, were empty, most of them burned out entirely. The Orthodox Synagogue in Kazinczy-street was badly damaged, near the Great Synagogue the remnants of the fences which encircled the ghetto were still visible. No. 23. Dohány street was a familiar address: my late grandfather – my mother's father used to have a hat shop there and an elegant flat on the second floor. He lived there alone since my

grandmother died and my grandfather died too, some years before the war. I was puzzled. How could my mother have taken refuge there?

The riddle was soon solved: Mrs. Fischof, an elderly lady who was living on the first floor of the same house, and used to be on friendly terms with my grandfather, told me that my mother spent a few days in her home, but during a raid she was seized by the Arrow Cross and never returned.

As she saw my terror, she added immediately:

“She is alive...she is alive...do not panic! She is living with your sister.....” and she gave the address, which proved to be right: Pozsonyi Út No12, third floor. After another hour of stumbling amongst the ruins, burnt out wreckages of trucks and other remains of the fighting, I finally arrived back at the Pest abutment of the Margaret-bridge, in the neighbourhood called “Újlipótváros” – to a group of relatively new and modern blocks of flats, built in the late thirties, during a “war boom” when many people invested their money in real estate – to avoid the consequences of rapid inflation.

I found Number 12 Pozsonyi út at last. The main door was missing: over the entrance the vestiges of a yellow star were still visible. The elevator was not working of course – I climbed the stairs and in no time I was ringing the bell of flat Number two on the third floor.

An unknown woman appeared, and looked at me cautiously.

“Who are you looking for?” she asked in a halting voice.

I told her my name and that I was looking for my mother, who I – had been told – was living there.

She turned round and cried joyously: “Margó...Margó. your son is here!”

A door opened inside and the slim, petite figure of my mother appeared.

“Oh my boy. I knew that you would come home, she whispered and embraced me, weeping.”

Now I shall try to evoke the story my mother told me during the following evenings. I did not make notes, of course, but each word of hers remains vividly in my mind. Her accounts of the tragic months went as follows:

“In mid April we were ordered to leave our home and to look for a room in the ghetto. Our chocolate factory was also seized: the work had to be stopped, the main doors were closed and sealed. We were told that it would be “aryanized” i.e. it would be handed over to another – Gentile – owner, but as, for the time being, there was a shortage of sugar and cocoa beans the stoppage would probably last till the siege of Budapest ended with a victory for the Nazis, of course.

“Your father was a courageous man possibly too brave, as proved by his death later on. He decided that we should not go to the ghetto. He was convinced that the people in the ghetto would be deported or killed on the spot. Therefore- he said – we should pretend we were going to the ghetto, but in fact we should hide in our factory, which would be unused anyway till the end of the siege...which would not be the Endsieg of the Germans of course, but our liberation.

“You were son doing forced labor somewhere on the Eastern front, we tried to reach your sister who was living on the other side of the Danube, in vain. There were just the two of us, my husband and myself. As we had the keys to the factory doors which we withheld it wasn't difficult to get in during the night without being seen by anybody. I arranged a hiding place in a store-room, behind sacks and crates of raw materials and we tiptoed through the offices in the machine room and through the other rooms where our workers used prepare specialities like sour cherries in cognac covered with chocolate, pralines, and other things. Now all the rooms were empty, and dark and we did not dare to turn on the electric light as the inhabitants might perceive our being there.

“The factory had been closed and unused for a few weeks when we got there – unfortunately this was enough time for the rats living in the cellar and attics of the old decrepit houses nearby to take the place over. During the nights to come. I hardly dared to close my eyes: the noise of the rats running up and down in the darkness, their ghastly squealing voices, made me tremble with fear and disgust.

“The rats were, however, less dangerous than the neighbors. We did all we could, so they would not notice our presence in the factory. I did not cook, at the beginning we were eating some cold food which we had brought with us as we left our home, and after this ran out, we began to eat the remains of the staples left behind: there was some barley flour, sugar, potato syrup, fortunately I found a few bar of chocolate too. It was enough to nourish us for the time being. One of the flats was too close to the factory to allow us even to turn on a taps. I was afraid they would hear the water running through the thin walls.

“Your father was braver, or thirstier than me. After some hesitation he turned on the tap over a wash-bowl, took some water to drink and started to wash his hands and face. In no time we heard steps outside and then knocking on the door to the office. He turned off the tap immediately, and we did not answer. However the unknown visitor knocked again and while we remained silent a man said:

“Open the door please, I know you are there.”

“I recognized the voice: Mr. Bogaras, the closest neighbor, whose house had a joint wall with the office, was there.”

“We looked at each other in terror.”

“We must open the door” he whispered” it might heable to be able him, otherwise he might call the police.”

He opened the door cautiously. Bogaras stood there, in a night shirt, with a candle in his hand.

“Though we were in mortal danger, the situation was so grotesque, that we both started laughing. Bogaras had bony, curved legs, his bald head was shining by the light of the candle.

“As I see, Mr. Halász, you are in a very good mood” Bogaras said “You are probably not aware of the fact that you are committing burglary!”

“You don’t mean to say that I am burgling my own factory?”

“It is not yours any more. It has been seized as Jewish property Bogaras retorted and your should be in the ghetto” he added.

At that point I tried to intervene. I went nearer to the door and said:

“Mr. Bogaras .. does your wife know we are here? If she does, did you tell her that you want to chase us from our own place and send us to the ghetto?”

I said this, because we were on friendly terms with his wife. She often came to chat with me and sometimes I helped her when she was short of money.

“She is asleep now” he answered somewhat embarrassed “but she told me yesterday that you must be hiding here, because she heard noises.”

“Please, go home now and when she wakes up, discuss the matter with her – I said - . She will probably give you the right advice” My voice broke, I felt that there were tears in my eyes.

“All right” Mr Bogaras answered “ I did not wish you to leave the place at night anyway” he mumbled and left. Somehow he put the “official seal deftly back onto the door.

The conversation with Mrs. Bogaras had result During the following night he returned and submitted his conditions: we should pay him five thousand pengős daily for his secrecy .

“I am taking a great risk, he said “but I am happy to save you.”

Possibly he meant it ,but the main point was the money anyway. The “fee” of five thousand pengős daily was an enormous amount; unfortunately two weeks we ran out of money.

“Look, Mr. Bogaras “my husband said “ I shall give you an I owe yons instead of cash. You can cash them after the war even if I die: the factory will be here, and my son will return.”

“I see that you want to cheat me Bogaras retorted no forced laborer has returned from the front, yet – and never will. Think it over again. I want money, not some dirty papers of yours”.

He left abruptly and we were sure that he would notify the police next morning. We had to leave immediately.

“I am going to look for Lili and Ági – your father said – meaning of course our daughter and Ági, our three year old daughter, our beloved grandchild. We only had a vague idea of their whereabouts since they had left their villa in Buda.

Fortunately, I knew the address of my best friend, Mariska Sebő, in the ghetto. We agreed that I should go there. I was sure that she would find room for us even if her family of five was crowded into a tiny room.

We packed our few belongings and left furtively, before dawn.

“I shall come and fetch you soon” he said as we kissed and said boodbye. The bridges were not yet blown up and he planned to cross the Danube over the nearest bridge – called Ferencz József bridge which bore the name of the Emperor of the now defunct Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. He turned to the right and I turned to the left, in the direction of the ghetto.

This was the last time I saw him. After the siege ended and the survivors of the Holocaust started to return, I was waiting for him in vain. A few weeks later I got word from the Baross Street Clinic that he had died there. He was wounded by a mine while crossing Calvin Square and an unknown man carried him on his shoulders to the Clinic where he died a few days later. He was buried in the courtyard of the Clinic in a temporary grave.

“ I was walking on the desolate, dark streets, trembling with fear. There was a curfew on the streets were empty, even the cats which used to scurry around the Great Market Hall, were gone absent. Before I went over at the Crossing of Erkel Street and the Üllői Avenue I looked cautiously around to see whether there were any police patrols around. Nobody moved, I decided to cross the wide avenue as fast as I could.

I was in the middle of the avenue when the sirens started screaming. To be honest – while everybody else was afraid of the air raids, for us Jews they were welcome events. For us they meant that the fight against the Nazis was going on, that the force of the Allies would ultimately defeat the beast. We greeted the planes of the Allies, even if their bombs might kill us. We prayed that they should come, and those who were at Auschwitz and Mauthausen I was told later on were anxious because they did not come.

After five or six minutes the air raid began. I did not care. I was even relieved thinking that the patrols of the police and the gangs of the Arrow Cross would have left the streets to hide in air raid shelters while the bombing was on. Quickening my pace I marched on, without looking around.

I was not cautious enough. Some of the Arrow Cross people who were listening to the news on the radio, might have known that the air raid would be over soon and left their shelter.

Unfortunately just then I was crossing Blaha Lujza Square a big open square with the National Theatre in the center. I stopped at the theatre – because I was out of breath and I

wanted to have a look at the big electric clock which used to be favorite meeting place in happier times when young couples made a “rendez- vous”. I was hardly standing there for a moment, when a boy of sixteen or seventeen, wearing the arrows cross emblem approached me.

“How come you are on the street at this hour, néni (auntie) he asked “perhaps you have no watch, this is why you are looking at the clock at nighttime!”

He spoke quite politely and I thought that the best way to get rid of him would be to reciprocate.

“You almost got it” I answered pleasantly it’s just that my watch stopped. “

“This is why you are out after curfew? he asked. Even now he spoke in quite a friendly way, but another Arrow Cross appeared.

He came to me and looked at my face.

“Aren’t you Jewish?” he asked sharply. He was so close to me that I felt the odour of some cheap pálinka which he might have drunk.

I tried to deny it , showing him the fake documents I had, but he was not to be convinced.

“You smell Jewish” he said ominously” I never miss..” He grabbed me by the arm and when I tried to resist, he slapped me hard and brutally. My glasses fell to the ground,

“Here you are” he said mocking me “an old Jewess without your rotten glasses”

“ My comrades will be pleased to have you.”

A long, continuous howl of sirens announced the end of the raid, I was pushed into a car and driven to the dreaded “Arrow Cross House” at Szent István Boulevard No 2.

I thought that I would be interrogated and I prepared a story in my mind, but nobody asked me anything at first. They took away everything I had with me..including my coat and I was dragged into a chilly cellar. There were already more than a dozen prisoners there –three

or four of them seemed to be Jewish boys who had somehow escaped forced labor and were arrested, one of them took me onto his confidence and told me the story of how they, had tried to save Jews by acquiring “Schutzpasses” at the office of the Swedish diplomat Raoul Wallenberg and taking them to Jewish families after which they could leave the ghetto and settle in “Protected Houses” which were considered safer because they were nominally under the protection of the Swedish Legation. One of these boys was the first to be taken for “interrogation”. We heard the sound of someone hitting and the wild shouting of the Arrow Cross asking him questions probably in vain, because after some time the shouting ended and we heard two or three shots. Then the second boy was taken away ,.after that the third one.

There was a young Calvinist minister among the prisoners. I can even tell you his name, because by chance I found out that he was a class-mate of you in the Zrinyi Miklós Gymnasium: he was called Gyula Nagy, and his “sin” according to the Arrow Cross – was that he had organized an orphanage for Jewish children whose parents were deported or killed in the ghetto. Gyula somehow got word that an Arrow Cross gang was planning a raid on the orphanage and succeeded in transferring the children to a “protected house” where they were relative safety – for the time being. In retaliation, he was detained and taken to the Arrow Cross House.

He was a brave man –even when tortured he did not give away the secret of the children’s hiding place. Luckily, he survived and later on became the director of the Hungarian YMCA.

I was the oldest among the prisoners – there were mothers with their children, young men who were suspected of being members of the “resistance” – which as far as I know did not exist – pretty young girls abducted from the ghetto. All of us had the feeling we were on the death row and events proved that our premonition was not far from the truth.

One after the other we were dragged to the “office” where the interrogations took place, and those who returned, were bloody and in excruciating pain from torture. Márta, the prettiest of the girls returned seemingly unharmed. But as she sat down, she sobbed:

“I was raped. I want to die”.

I tried to comfort her, but she wept and wept, repeating that she wanted to die.

The next day she was taken again to the “office” and she never returned. An Arrow Cross bandit told the girls ominously: ... “better you do not resist, Jewish whores..”

Then it was my turn to get “interrogated”. They asked questions about the whereabouts of my jewellery and my money. Evidently they were not satisfied with my wedding ring and the necklace which they seized when they took all my belongings – they wanted to know where my family’s money and other valuables were hidden.

I did not answer, but they hit me several times on the head and I lost consciousness. I was awakened to by some cold water they poured over me – and the leader of the gang, a big, fat man, started pressing glowing cigarette butts on my body.

It hurt terribly and I was about to tell them the name and address of our factory – knowing that your father was not there and to be honest, I did not care about the cocoa-beans and barley wheat which they might loot but at that moment a door opened and an Arrow Cross man rushed in, crying:

“They Russians are here.. they are already at the parliament!”

The parliament, on the shore of the Danube was about 3-400 meters from the Arrow Cross House. I closed my eyes and muttered a prayer because I thought that the man with the pock-marked face would shoot me before fleeing, but at the last minute Gyula jumped up me, pushed the bewildered bandit away, took my hand and started running out of the place. I was too weak to run, but he dragged me along and this way we were about twenty or thirty meters away when the Arrow Cross people started shooting at us and at the others, who – following

us – were also running to the four winds. We could still hear the shooting as we turned into a side street but the Russians were advancing and the members of the Arrow Cross were forced to flee. They probably crossed the Danube to Buda, which was defended by the SS and the Arrow Cross for another month after that.

I was weak and I had been tortured, there were wounds on my body and my face because of the blows and the cigarette butts, but I was alive. I found my friend Mariska easily in her “new home” – which was in fact just one room in a “Protected House” where she found refuge when she was forced to leave her own home.

Both of us were crying for joy, and also out of anguish for our husbands who were missing – though at that time both of us hoped to have them back soon. The fate of our sons was also uncertain. Mariska’s son Dénes (generally called “Dunci”) was an outgoing fellow, a great football-fan and gambler , liked by everybody.

“I am sure that he will return” Mariska sighed “I cannot imagine that anybody could do him any harm”.

The flat, where Mariska lived offered a ghostly sight. It must formerly have been the elegant home of a well-to-do upper middle class family. Three to five people were living now in each of the five rooms. As there was only one toilet, people had to queue up sometimes for a long time. The cooking for that many people in a narrow kitchen, was like a bad dream. The inhabitants were not allowed to leave the house, just for one or two hours at prescribed times, to do the shopping. There was not much to buy anyway, because food was scarce. Shopping was also dangerous, because the infamous Vannay Commando specialized in “Catching Lipótváros Jews on the streets.

“We tried to stay at home” Mariska said “just one or two of the bravest undertook to do the shopping for the whole house. The Arrow Cross Gangs however soon discovered this and they made raids on the protected houses”.

She started to weep.

“We never knew when they would come again, to rob, to rape, to take people away and shoot them on the shore of the Danube.”

I tried to comfort her.

“Now they will not come again” I said.

“Are you sure that the Russians will be better?” she sobbed.

Well,.. they were better.. somewhat. They did not kill us. They just raped without regard for the victim’s religion. They took everybody’s watches. Otherwise they were sometimes human.- even kind, to children. I tried to understand their state of mind. In their country millions were killed, villages and towns burned, families uprooted.

We were living more safely now, but in agonizing anguish, Mariska, her daughter Márta and I. Both of us were waiting husbands and son to come back, Márta was waiting for her boyfriend. The siege of Buda was still going on, when I went back to Erkel utca, to see what remained of our home and our factory. Our flat was on the second floor of a house which was hit by a bomb. I could only find a few remnants of our furniture and our piano, which remained by some miracle, unharmed though it had fallen from the second to the main floor. The factory looked worse. The doors were open, the sacks of cocoa-beans, the blocks of cocoa-butter, all the basic materials had disappeared. The neighbors around the factory could

not – or would not – tell me, who the burglars were. The Arrow Cross? The Hungarians?
Nobody told me the truth

Then we removed the yellow star from over the entrance to the house, and acquired mattresses, because until then we had to sleep on the floor: we tried to start a normal life.

First of all, to eat normally.

This was no easy task, as the shops were closed; the money had no value and one could get some food only by barter: giving used clothing, a pair of shoes, an umbrella, or anything else that was usable – in exchange for potatoes, beans, lentils, some flour, eggs, Chicken was a rarity, sausages or smoked pork were non-existent. I remember an old woman, holding something which looked like an old night shirt in her hands and weeping, because nobody wanted to take it. “I am hungry .. I am hungry ..” she sobbed.

We were permanently hungry, our many problem however, was not food, but lack of news about our loved ones. It was a problem many people shared: the walls of the houses, the advertising pillars, the doors to the houses were full of handwritten notices enquiring about the whereabouts of missing husbands, sons, daughters and other relatives ... asking anybody who knew of them, to notify their anxious families. All three of us we studied these notices assiduously. At the same time, we were sticking our own notices up on the walls. There was less and less hope as the days went by and no news arrived. We did not know at that time, that many of the Budapest Jews were deported before the siege of the city to place of which we had never heard of .. like Mauthausen Theresienstadt or Auschwitz...

Mariska was the happiest... and the unhappiest of us. One Friday evening when we were lucky enough to get hold of two candles, a neighbor came crying:

Dunci is here! “ „, and a few minutes later Mariska’s son entered. He was even smaller than earlier, he was haggard and looked much older than his years but he was alive.

Our neighbors celebrated with us. Somebody had got hold of a chicken and a tasty paprika- chicken was prepared, Dunci gobbled up in a few minutes. He had a bath and smoked the cigarette offered by Andris Winter, a neighbor, who somehow acquired a packet of Memphis, a rare treasure at that time. He was enjoying all these things, but he hardly said a word and did not seem happy at all.

Marta asked him about Bihari Laci, his boy friend together with Dunci was seized during a raid. Had they stayed together? Did he know anything about his fate?

He seemed to be relieved by Marta’s question and was now ready to speak.

He recounted the story of people seized during raids... and rounded up by other methods.. like the Jewish women of the ghetto who were offered jobs and safety as “needlewomen” and who foolishly believed the Germans and assembled on the race track called “Tattersal.”

To save “railways capacity”, tens of thousand of these people were forced to march to concentration camps in Germany... During their march they got no food, they were forbidden to leave the road to ask for food or water, those who could not march on, were shot or beaten to death by the SS guards.

Bihari Laci was clever – and brave – enough to hide under a bridge. He probably stayed there.. and after the marchers went by, he managed to hide somewhere, he may have returned since then.

“What happened to Dad? “Mariska asked in a whisper.

“He did not want to hide.” He told me that he was a tailor.. and he was sure that he was going to work wherever they took us. He was a soldier during the Great War and he knew what a forced march means – he said – one had just have to survive the march and everything would be all right.”

Dunci stopped talking. His mother asked him in vain to continue.

“What happened to your father, tell me please” Mariska asked him again. But he remained silent.

After a few minutes of silence he broke into tears.

“He died peacefully, mom. Please, don’t ask any more questions” he said sobbing.

It was a pious lie. He did not die not peacefully. Much later, I heard the truth.. I hardly dare write it down here. Dunci and his father were both marched into the Mauthausen concentration camp. After a few weeks starvation they were so weak that they could hardly move. Their only good moment there was when somebody found a dead sparrow and they somehow baked it and ate it. A sparrow for four people... The man who found the sparrow and told the story, was my son-in-law, Marci. A strong boy, a champion figureskater before Mauthausen, he was a living skeleton when he returned.

He told me with horror and revulsion how Dunci’s father died.

He had to go to the latrines.. and as he stopped for a moment an SD guard pushed him into hole, laughing. He drowned in the human excrement.

One can imagine my anguish as I heard one horrible story after the other.

Ultimately however, my granddaughter who was three years old at that time was found safe and sound.

The child was kept in a creche managed by a Lutheran Pastor called Gábor Sztehló who saved the lives of more than a hundred children there – Jewish and gentile alike.

Lilly my daughter at the same time was maid in the household of a gentile professor: I do not know whether they guessed that her documents were fake.

After my son came back, he made arrangements for the exhumation and burial of my husband. We put him to rest in the old Jewish cemetery – and placed a beautiful tomb stone of marble on his grave. He was sixty two years old when he died.

Si vivis Romae...

When in Rome, do as the Romans do: I tried to follow the old saying, though it was not very easy in the year after World War II: the Romans themselves did not know how to build up a new and democratic way of life after the fall of fascism. Though Mussolini was shot by a partisans and his corpe strung up together with Eva Petacci, his lover in Milan, the victims killed by the Nazis at the Fosse Ardeatine in Rome were mourned and solemnly buried.. the remnants of fascism were still there: the gigantic buildings of the various Cameras and offices stood there, empty and unused, the Citá Olimpica built of marble for an Olympiad newer to take place was these. In some parts of the city remnants of old fascist placards were still to be seen on the walls.. just a few indeed, because most of them were covered by the posters of the Communist Party. Even in the Eternal City it looked as though Italy was marching towards communism.

It was the spring of 1947. I had been living in Ronk as a correspondent of the Hungarian News Agency. After the terrible years of war and persecution, I felt that the turn of history – and some good fortune – had raised me like a gigantic wave to an apogee of life. Though circumstances were troubled both in Hungary and in Italy with inborn optimism I hoped that everything would turn out alright the end.

Even my arrival in Italy seemed to be exceptionally fortunate. After arranging some lodgings in Rome – which was a complicated task, because it was not very easy to find a low-rent flat which I could afford – I was waiting for my wife and our eight months old daughter at the Santa Lucia railway station in Venice.

I was waiting patiently as the train usually arrived one or two hours later than scheduled. Finally an old steam-engined locomotive pulled the rusty carriages in and the platform was soon full of travelers but Noemi and the child were not there.

My anxiety was growing as the last arrivals were about to leave the platform.. at the last moment however I saw that there were two women one of them holding a baby in her arms, looking around as if they were looking for somebody. I was standing alone at the entrance to the platform – all of a sudden, one of the women pointed towards me as if she had found the person they were looking for.

They approached me, and asked in English who I was waiting for.

As I told them my name and the name of my wife and my little daughter Sylvia, who was waiting for, the taller one of the two women looked at me and started laughing.

“You may speak Hungarian.. we are Hungarians too she said and I am holding your little daughter in my arms.”

Now I recognized tiny, blonde Sylvia.. and I almost wept for joy.. and anguish.

“Where is my wife” I asked “how come you are carrying the child?” I asked.

A complicated story unfolded as they related what happened. A fierce diplomatic struggle was going on at that time for the town Trieste. Tito the head of communist Yugoslavia demanded that Trieste be handed over to his country. The Italian government – and the inhabitants of Trieste – wished the town to remain part of Italy. Until the question was resolved, the troops of the Allied powers were stationed

in Trieste, and anybody who wanted to cross the town, needed a special visa issued by the Allied Authorities.

“We had the visa and therefore we were allowed to continue our journey. Your wife had no visa she was obliged to leave the train..” one of the ladies told me.

“.. and what happened to her?” I asked terrified.

She took a taxi to make a tour and catch the train beyond Trieste” she answered, smiling.

I thanked them, took over the child, and took her to a nearby hotel. A kind chamber maid changed her and gave her some baby food, while I waited at Santa Lucia for Noemi. She arrived late in the evening. Sylvia was sleeping peacefully as her mother entered the room.

“Who were the two ladies?” I asked her. It was very kind of them to look after our baby. By the way.. one of them, the tall one, looked as if I had seen her photo somewhere..”

“She was Julia Rajk” Noemi answered “you must have seen her photo in the newspapers.”

Now I recalled the aquiline profile, the stout almost masculine figure. Julia Rajk often appeared on the first pages of the newspapers – sometimes in the company of László Rajk, her husband, sometimes alone László Rajk was one of the leading personalities of the Communist Party – Minister for the interior, later Foreign Minister Julia was a politician in her own right too: President of the Hungarian Women’s

Democratic Association she came to Italy to attend a conference, accompanied by her pretty, young secretary.

The later developments of László Rajk's life are well known: he was arrested for "conspiracy" to topple socialism and after one of the famous show-trials arranged by Mátyás Rákosi and his henchmen, he was executed. Many years later, I met Julia Rajk. She was disillusioned with communism, and she was fed up with the inhumanities of "existing socialism".. as the regime of János Kádár used to be called. Her only joy was her son, László Rajk junior. Interestingly, the son was born just about a year after our meeting in Venice and Noemi had the instinctive feeling that the conception of Rajk junior had something to do with Julia's holding our baby in her arms for a few hours. During the last years of the communist regime in Hungary László Rajk junior was member of the semi-clandestine opposition. He operated a printing shop which produced anti-government leaflets and placards, took part in demonstrations. the police harassed him, but did not dare to arrest the son of László Rajk. After the change of regime he retired from politics and became a successful interior designer and architect.

After the memorable encounter in Venice, I rented an apartment in Via Latina in Rome and my "Italian adventure" began.

I call it an adventure because I was living in the midst of a turmoil. In Italy unemployment was high, inflation was rampant, there were many nouveaux riches and even more destitute people. After internment during Mussolini's regime, the members of the Mafia reorganized in Central- and Northern Italy too Palmiro Togliatti, the head of the Italian Communist Party told me confidently that "after the general elections to

come, his Party will form coalition with Pietro Nenni's socialists and they will come to power in Italy."

Carlo Sforza, the foreign minister whom I met at press receptions in the Palazzo Chigi, was of a different opinion.

"The communists may get a great number of votes, but they will never achieve a majority.. even in coalition with the socialists" he said "the Italian people has had enough of dictatorship.. they will never accept another one with a different logo."

Count Sforza was a fatherly figure. He was of course a member of one of the oldest families of the Italian aristocracy. The Sforzas traced their origins back to Roman times.. The family-tree of the Sforzas even had some Etruscan ancestry, I was told.

Our friendship – if I may call it that way – began with an interjection of mine at one of Sforza's press conferences. In connection with the Nuremberg trials, an American journalist remarked that the Allies should have put some of the leading Italian politicians and generals on trial.

I interjected that in my view more than enough justices had been done by the partisans who executed Mussolini and his lover Clara Petacci.. and that the Italians – unlike the Germans – had not committed genocide. I recalled my experience at the front, where the Italian soldiers did not carry out the order to execute us and I added information which I got from Italian friends, that during the time of the persecution of Jews in Italy, if they knocked at a strangers' door, they could be ninety nine percent certain that they would be given refuge.. and as a result of the people's compassion the great majority of Italian Jews survived the holocaust.

A few days after the press conference, I was working as usual in the foreign Journalist's Club, the "Associazione Stampa Estera" at Piazza San Silvestro. I had a comfortable room there which I shared with Yolanda Svenstrup, an elderly Swedish lady journalist who had been in Rome since two decades and sometimes entertained me with her experiences during Mussolini's regime.

An usciera – a waiter – came in, with a letter in his hand. "From His Excellency the Count Sforza for you, Signor Dottore" he told me with great reverence. (All members of the club without exception were called Signor Dottore for same reason. I opened the letter and read with great surprise that I was being invited not to a press conference but to a "glass of champagne with the Minister."

"Ask him why he was so very keen to depose the King" Yolanda said ironically as I told her that was going to meet the Count. She was an ardent royalist, and Count Sforza – the leader of the liberal opposition against Mussolini in the Senate until his forced exile – was a prime mover of the overthrow of the monarchy when returned to Italy after the war.

I had a caffè espresso in a bar in the Piazza Colonna before I went to Palazzo Chigi, to see the Count. In the center of the square, the tall Column of Marcus Aurelius with its spiraling reliefs reminded me of the Roman emperor who philosophized about the meaning of life while waging war on the shores of the Danube... The people sitting at the tables and standing at the bar, were discussing politic, inflation and price of American cigarettes on the black market. A young man I knew from the Associazione Stampa Estera, suggested that we should have a Martini, which meant of course that he had no money and I should pay. I complied and – as a token of his gratitude – he told me the secret of how one could make money by

sending “gags” to Hollywood. He sent them regularly, to several studios – and he was just expecting a cheque he said.

I left this mixture of history and turbulent present and went – in through the gate of the Palazzi Chigi.

This time I was ushered not in to the hall, where the press receptions usually took place – but in to the minister’s study. There were renaissance paintings on the walls, a bronze Aphrodite was standing on a pedestal of marble – and the descendant of the patron of Leonardo da Vinci greeted me cordially – I felt like I was in a dream we shook hands.

I wanted to meet you, Signor Halász – he said – because I think you could give me some information about a subject which I do not know well enough. Here in Italy, as you have probably already heard, an intense debate is going on concerning the role of the Vatican during the war.. I would like to hear your opinion as someone who lived through those terrible times, in a country where the Church used to have almost as much political influence as in Italy.

“I would prefer not to comment on this subject, Signor Conte because I may considered biased since I am Jewish” I said hesitantly.

“It is precisely because you are Jewish – as I assumed following your interjection at the press conference – that I ask you to tell me the truth about what happened to your people in Hungary.”

I told him a few details of my personal adventures – emphasizing Father Elek’s role in my survival. Then I related my mother’s story and the shootings and killings in Budapest,

“I was told governor Horthy saved the Budapest Jews” the Count remarked.

“He stopped the deportations of the Budapest Jews after all the others living in the country had already been sent to Auschwitz and other concentration camps, to be annihilated. The police and the gendarmes collaborated very efficiently with the Germans. Without their help it would have been impossible to effectuate the deportation of half a million people in just ten weeks.”

“People are changing” Sforza mused “look.. some of my ancestors were cruel autocrats, and I am a republican, a democrat. Your people will change too, I am sure.”

“I hope so too, your Excellency... if the present coalition lasts, and democracy ultimately prevail.”

“Well, let’s hope for the best” Sforza sighed “democracy is a fragile institution, I am convinced that we all learned from the tragic experiences of the past and both we in Italy and your in Hungary will take care of it.”

A few days after this memorable encounter, I was visiting my friend Amerigo Tot, the sculptor. As I told him the story of my “private” encounter with Sforza, he was bewildered.

“So the old bastard is playing defender of democracy?” he raged “he was lying to your..”

Tot was in his late thirties, with sharp features as if carved out of stone. He was of peasant stock born in Csurgó, a little village in Western Hungary. Later on, spurred on by a his wish to become on artist, he went to Dessau to study at the Bauhaus with László Moholy-Nagy. From Dessau he moved to Paris, where Maillol became his

master. After a number of years spent almost starving and living in garret chambers, he joined the group of “revolutionary expressionists” lead by Otto Dox in Berlin just in time to be sent to a concentration camp when Hitler seized power in Germany.

Tot somehow succeeded in to escaping and walked from Berlin to Rome. For some time he lived in dire poverty there too.. We often went together many times to the “Ristorante Othello” – a cheap little restaurant, where at one time he used to draw portraits of customers, who paid for his lunch.. or for a bottle of wine.. as a fee for his work. Late on, he had some success with his engravings, he also founded a ceramic workshop in Positano producing ceramic figures and pottery. Though an artist and a bohemian, Tot preserved somewhat of the inborn common sense of the Hungarian peasant. When we met in Rome, he was already one of the well known sculptors in Italy, got commissions from the Vatican, and his sculptures were exhibited in galleries but he was still a regular of the cheap “Ristorante Othello”.. and still more frequently cooked meals for friends and for himself at home. Sometimes he prepared Hungarian dishes, gulyás or paprikás which reminded him of his village.. but his favourites were the “fruits of the sea” and the specialities of Roman cuisine, such as “carcioffi alla Romana” – Artichokes Roman style – filled with a mixture of parsley, garlic and thyme and baked in olive oil, or – Hare marinated in wine and baked with garlic, parsley and bacon. We and some great dinners at Tot’s home in Via Margutta, the street of artists, where he had lived for a number of years.

Thanks to Amerigo I learned some of the secrets of Rome – which even many Romans did not know. We visited the Campidoglio many times – and admired the equestrian statue of Emperor Marcus Aurelius – Amerigo revealed to me that the big horse made of bronze, many years ago started to sing.. This was first discovered by Giacchino Belli and following his discovery, thousands flocked to listen to the

mysterious choir hiding in the horse's belly. Ultimately somebody discovered that rainwater collected in the horse's belly through a breach, and dozens of frogs were living there and "singing" aloud. After the breach was repaired and the horse's belly dried out the Emperor's horse stopped singing.

Amerigo was commissioned by Prince Colonna to do some restoration work and he took me on one of his visits to the Palazzo Colonna. We passed the crossing of Piazza Venezia and Via del Corso where Madame Letizia, the mother of Napoleon spent the last years of her life in one of the palazzos observing the passers by from a closed balcony. According to the legend, a horseman dressed in black, arrived there on the day of Napoleon's death, announced that the emperor was dead and galloped away. Nobody knew how – before the age of modern telecommunications he had got the news on the day of Napoleon's death.

Amerigo was asked to do the restoration of the reliefs on one of the entrance doors to the Palazzo... a considerable task which needed profound study. Though he knew the palace well, he wanted to study a number of details. We walked around, looking at the frescoes on the walls and on the ceiling, the reliefs, the bronzes.. At the sight of two beautiful, big vases, he started to laugh. I looked at the golden vases carefully but could not see anything humorous.

Why are you laughing?" I wondered.

"Because these vases were used as pissoirs during the times of Marc-Antonio Colonna "Amerigo replied "the gentlemen used them to relieve themselves before entering the great hall."

I do not know whether Amerigo ever completed the work.

Another time we were just about to start eating osso buco in the Ristorante Othello, when a big guy with a graying beard came in howling:

“Amerigo.. Amerigo.. where are you?”

Renato Guttuso, the painter was looking for Amerigo. He knocked in vain at this studio in Via Margutta – he explained – and he was sure to find him at Othello’s.

“Right you are come, eat with us, old bastard” Amerigo invited him to share the feast.

I knew that besides being a celebrated neo-realist painter, Guttuso was also dedicated communist. He was even a member of the Central Committee of the Italian Communist Party. I did not know however that he was a glutton too. In no time at all he gobbled up our osso buco... we had to order more portion for ourselves.

While we were drinking some Chianti, Guttuso chided Amerigo because he was working for the Vatican.

“I detest Pius XII” he said “while we were fighting the Nazis, he was sitting comfortably on his throne in the Vatican and exchanging courtesies with Hitler.”

Amerigo just shrugged his shoulders.

“I do not like him either.. but do you think that Bramante liked Pope Julius when he was working for him?”

“No.. I do not” Guttuso laughed “just as Marinetti confided to me that he hated Mussolini. “He poured another glass of wine for himself then added ironically: “He said so before the Marcia su Roma, of course..”

Filippo Tommaso Marinetti was of course the founder of “futurismo”, a movement which aimed to smash old values and create a “new dynamism” – as a writer and a poet, he glorified the dynamism of the twentieth century, the “machine age” together with war and danger... and he was celebrated by Mussolini as a “prophet of fascism”..

Interestingly, Marinetti's ideas were picked up by some innovative painters – like Boccioni, Carra, Severini – and by introducing what they called “dynamism of space” into cubism, they developed a new trend.. which tried to visualize consecutive phases of movement the “fourth dimension” as they called it.

Amerigo liked the futurist's work. Guttuso hated it.

“You must separate art from politics” Amerigo said.

“If you do, you are committing a sin against humanity” Guttuso retorted. His face was red with anger, his lips trembled.

“Did Leonardo commit a sin against humanity when he changed sides – joined the king of France after the defeat of the Duke of Milan? Amerigo said slowly.

Renato did not answer. His “Crucifixion”, which was awarded the Bolzano Prize, was recently put on the Index by the Vatican.

“Just because I visualized the Saviour as a Sicilian peasant crucified by the great landlords” Guttuso remarked.

Possibly this was the reason for his present anger.

“We will win the next elections” the painter said later on “you may be sure, Amerigo, that we are going to win.”

“I hope that democracy will be not swept away by your victory” Amerigo remarked sourly.

“Of course it will be not” Guttuso replied, angrily hitting the table with his fist again. “We are the real democrats, not the people of De Gasperi”.

Did he believe this.. though he might have read about the show-trials in Moscow, already?

Carlo Levi was another friend of Amerigo... and of mine. A physician by profession, he was a frequent visitor to Via Margutta in his capacity as a painter. One

or two years before we met, he had published his novel “Christ stopped at Eboli”, about his experiences in Lucania, where he was interned as an antifascist by Mussolini’s regime – and where he got to know the dire poverty of the peasants of the Italian South.

Rural poverty, unknown – or ignored – by the well-to-do, city-dwelling middle class, was a subject all three of us were deeply interested in. Amerigo because of hard personal experience – Levi and I because both of us came from socially sensitive Jewish middle class families. After he became a medical doctor, Levi considered it his task to cure the poor in his hometown.. He only got to know the direst poverty during his internment, in a village among the hills of Southern Italy. As for myself, in Budapest we lived in Népszínház-street, near Teleki square where the poorest of the poor – the “kubikos” people – landless farm-hands, who did casual work in earth-moving jobs, waited long days and nights without shelter to be hired for job. I often talked to them – and they told me stories about their lives which I shall never forget.

“We will eliminate social injustice” Renato told us, hitting the table with his fist again.

“The fascists said the same” Amerigo responded bitterly.

I rented a flat in Via Latina – in a neighborhood far from the city center, and since there were no buses or street-cars, at that times, I had to commute by hitchhiking on trucks, which carried passengers regularly for a convenient tip. It was a very uncomfortable way of getting to my place of work, the Associazione Stampa Estera and back home, but it had the advantage that I could meet people of different classes and occupations. who were forced to hitchhike like me.

Some of these occasional acquaintances was: a young man in his early twenties. Besides Yiddish he spoke some Hungarian too. Originally he lived with his

parents and sisters at Mukacevo a town in Csechoslovakia which had belonged to Hungary earlier and was called Munkács. Now he was alone in Rome – he told me – and was doing research via the Red Cross to find members of his family.

After we jumped off the platform of the truck somewhere beyond Porta Pia, I invited him to have a coffee with some sandwiches in a bar, and there Leo as he was called, told me briefly how the Jews of Mukacevo were first forced to leave their homes and move to the ghetto, then, after a few days, to assemble at the marketplace.

“Then – he said – we were divided into two groups. It was an ominous division, because in one of the groups there were just the elderly and mothers with young children – in the other group, those of us who were of working age. I was separated from my parents and my young sisters. I tried of course to slip over to them but the gendarmes pushed me back. “

“Where were you deported?” I asked.

“I was lucky ... relatively speaking” he answered bitterly “I was deported to Theresienstadt in German-occupied Bohemia.. we worked on the land most of the time... we could steal carrots and potatoes sometimes. That way we did not starve.”

He did not continue the story. He was in a deadly state of angst.. because his family might have been deported to Auschwitz.

I met Leo several times after our first encounter then he disappeared from Rome and I never saw him again. After a few years I got a letter from San Francisco, where he had a printing shop.. he informed me, inviting me to visit him if I happened to travel to the US.

I thanked him for the invitation and cautiously asked about his family.

Leo never answered. Later on, from a book by the holocaust-researcher László Karsai, I learned that most Mukacevo Jews were deported to Auschwitz and were gassed there.

The time of general elections in Italy was drawing near. There were posters on the walls all around. The competing parties were sticking their own posters on top of the other parties posters. Mass demonstrations took place followed by scuffles... shots where exchanged, people were wounded and some unlucky ones died.

“The communists are going to win” the polls forecast. Yolanda, my Swedish neighbor at the associazine Stamapa Estera started packing up.

“I could not suffer another dictatorship” she said ruefully, because she just loved to living in Rome. She was bitter that she might be forced to return to Sweden, which she considered “reliable but boring”.

Polling day passed off peacefully.

There was considerable queuing at the polling stations, but the crowds were in a surprisingly quiet mood: young mothers were breastfeeding their babies, men were playing cards, children were playing around...

“Now you can see with your own eyes how a peaceful revolution takes place” said Renato as he visited a couple of polling stations with Amerigo and me. He had already cast his vote and now he wanted us – who could not vote of course – to witness the communist victory.

He was mistaken. A few hours after the voting and the partial results started to be announced – it gradually became obvious that the communists and their allies, the Nenni - socialists were defeated and De Gasperi’s Democrazia Christiana would be the winners – with an overall majority.

I hurried to the Associazione Stampa Estera and immediately started to transmit the results. I had to do it by phone, as no fax or e-mail existed at that time.

As I dictated the figures which indicated a clear victory by the Democrazia Christiana and the defeat of the communists, I heard the stenographer's heavy breathing. "Wait a minute" he said after I stopped dictating "the Editor wants to speak to your."

"You are giving us wrong figures" I immediately heard the voice of Mr. László Baló the acting editor "you are transmitting fake numbers.. please get hold of the accurate ones and transmit them immediately."

I was amazed. The figures I was telling them were the officially published results.

"I can't understand.. what do you have in mind, Sir? I asked.

"I mean the figures issued by the Italian Communist Party of course" he answered brusquely.

I had read those figures already: the Press Department of the Communist Party only published the results of some "red precincts of Turin and Milan and kept silent about the overall result, which meant a crushing defeat of the communists.

It was difficult not to laugh at the awkward tactics Mr. Baló wanted to apply.

"I do not see your point, Sir – I said humbly -. in no time the end result will be published and it is beyond doubt that Signor De Gasperi will be asked by the President of the Republic to form a government.."

"Are you sure of that?" he asked angrily.

"Nothing is sure in politic.. but figures are figures" I answered, amused.

There was not much to be amused about.. a few days later, I got a letter from Mr. Baló in which he informed me that my assignment was terminated and I should return to Budapest.

I did not know what to do. I wanted very much to stay in Italy.. on the other hand I felt a strong urge to return and to join the staff of an independent newspaper in Hungary. Also I was worried about my old, widowed mother. It was a terrible feeling to leave her there unaided, alone.

To my astonishment, Count Sforza invited me for a “private encounter” again.

“I heard of your troubles” he told me, while I was sipping a Martini and smoking – as an exception – the cigar he offered me. “You have to make a decision which may influence your whole life.”

I did not ask the count, where he got his information from.. all the phones of the Associazione Stampa Estera were tapped, everybody knew that.

“Your Excellency is right” I answered “I have to decide whether to go home.. or to abscond.”

“Your country is in a difficult situation. But I am hopeful. It may improve...”

“How do you mean that, Excellency, we are occupied by the Soviet Army...”

“Nonetheless.. there is some hope. The basic elements of democracy still exist it will survive if people like you do not give up but continue to work for it..”

Sometimes one wants to believe an optimistic forecast, even if deep in his heart one has the presentiment that it is not true. I wanted to believe...

“Are you advising me to return?” I mumbled.

Yes, I am, and we will give you a permanent visa so you will have the right to come to Italy whenever you wish.”

I got the visa.. but my passport was seized at the Hungarian frontier and never returned to me. After a few weeks I was ousted from my job... Mátyás Rákos and his gang took over, people began to disappear without a trace. Show trials were staged, in the courtyards of the prisons, secret executions took place.

Count Sforza was mistaken, democracy was crushed for good – there was “darkness at noon”.

We were an odd bunch of people sitting in the semi-darkness of the big entrance-hall, drinking strong, thick “espresso” coffee and munching “Turó Rudi” sticks – chocolate bars filled with cottage cheese. It was the usual mid-afternoon coffee-break, the enjoyable half-hour we all eagerly looked forward to, while working in the narrow cubicles-editing manuscripts, doing translations, preparing some text for the printers.

A friend visiting my place of work, looked around curiously.

“This place at Váci utca No 12 used to be an elegant brothel before the war” he said “I am quite sure about it, as a young man I came here quite often. But I did not my time in an awkward cubicles such as this one you are working in. I was well-off and I was a guest of honor.. There must be some big, elegant room somewhere..”

“That one is now the office of the boss” I answered, laughing. He is using it.”

“There was on elegant bathroom too.” my friend mused.

“Of course there is one.. for the moment Mr. Cserépfalvi is keeping a carp in the tub. He plans to take the live fish home” I remarked.

Mr. Imre Cserépfalvi, th4e director of the publishing house, was a remarkable individual. A tiny man with thin red hair, he was both a successful publisher and an enthusiastic amateur bee-keeper.

He had already had a well-known publishing house before World War II.. and in those times he was brave enough to publish “revolutionary” who tried to reveal the misery of landless peasants living on feudal estates, poems by Attila József, probably the greatest Hungarian poet of the twentieth century.. he even published a novel by the Soviet writer Solochow – while Hungary was Hitler’s ally in the war against the Soviet Union.

An outspoken and critical character, Cserépfalvi was disliked by the Stalinist regime of Mátyás Rákosi – but after the death of Stalin, with “détente” approaching, he was intrusted with the founding of a new publishing house which would publish works of Hungarian literature and art in foreign languages – and present them to a non-Hungarian readership all over the world.

Because there was a shortage of people who were able to do the job – he started the undertaking by engaging a number of “outcasts” – including myself.

I don’ want to elaborate on my “tribulations” the personal histories of the other at Corvina was much more interesting. Nonetheless – I want to relate a tragicomic event happened to the because it might have people been a chapter from a book by the unforgettable Soviet humorists, (Remember the short story in which they described a clothes shop, with elegant ladies and gentlemen on its shop sign... “there was just one slight problem, a notice on the door which said: no trousers”)

Well—after I was dismissed from my journalist I worked as a translator with a state-owned foreign trade company, but the “punishing hand of the Party” soon reached me there too and after a few weeks I was sacked as “an enemy of the working class.”

I had no alternative to start a new life as a street sweeper or eventually a prison inmate.. when a quite improbable turn of events took place. The press department of the Foreign Ministry needed translators who would also be able to write bulletins in foreign languages.. and when they discovered that the “in –people” would not or could not do this badly paid work, they started looking for capable outsiders?

When a big, black car stopped in front of our house, I was terrified – I thought that the henchmen of the ÁVO had come to arrest me. But I was wrong. The press department was sending me a Hungarian document to translate in to English very urgently.

After that I worked regularly for the Foreign Ministry. I was not allowed into building – I had to pick up the job – and hand over my typescript in a little office which opened on to Bem street, that is where I got-paid too.. Though an “outcast” till the very end, I drafted articles, and even speeches. I shall never forget the article of Rude Pravo, the Czechoslovak Communist Party’ daily paper which praised the “superb oratory of the Hungarian Foreign Minister” at some festive occasion in Prague... a speech I had drafted for the magnificent fee of 300.-forints..

After this tragicomic detour which lasted for four years- I was now one of the readers at the Corvina Publishing House.. and owing Cserépfalvi’s brilliant leadership, I was indeed, able to do meaningful work. I worked on Jenő Barcsay’s Atlas of Anatomy... probably the most beautiful Atlas since Leonardo’s which became an instant success. I also collaborated with film director István Homoki-Nagy on his book about the “adventures” of his dog, a beautiful and clever Hungarian vizsla.. and so on.

The greatest experience at Corvina was however meeting unforgettable characters – people who suffered of their ideals and survived the hell of the prisons and concentration camps run by the ÁVO.

There was for instance László Pődör, a professor of French literature – a lean man in his early forties, whose inborn talent for linguistics was shown by the fact that he was able to distinguish between the two kinds of “e” pronounced “a” in Hungarian – the “open one” and the “closed one “... which he probably picked up in Csorna a village in Western most Hungary, called Örség” where he spent his childhood.

Pődör took part in the Resistance during the German occupation in the town of Miskolc, where he was teaching in a high school. – After the war joined the diplomatic service and became the councilor to the Hungarian embassy in Rome. The reason for his “mishap” was that László Rajk, the Foreign Minister – Pődör’s friend – became the defendant

in the one of the show trials – and as the prosecution needed “co-conspirators,” Pődör was chosen as one of the culprits.

He told me the story of his arrest and interrogation while sitting in a bar called “Muskátli” opposite the building where Corvina had its offices.

“They came during the night and took me to Andrásy út No.60, the dreaded headquarters of the ÁVO – (the Hungarian KGB) there I was kept in a dark, underground prison for some days. From there I was lead into a room on the first or second floor, where a young man wearing the uniform of the ÁVO greeted me. ✍

“Well, here you are, Pődör” he said quite politely “I can tell you clearly that what happens to you now.

“He offered me a cigarette and waved to me to sit down at a table on which there was paper, pen and ink.

“We are going to have a conversation he said “and I hope that you will tell me everything about your activities in the organization..”

“What do you mean by “organization” I asked.

“Well... the network of spies led by the traitor László Rajk of course...

“I started to laugh.

“Do you really mean it?” I asked “You must know as well as I do that Rajk is a dedicated communist and a patriot..”

“While I was talking I heard terrifying noises from a neighboring room. Somebody was crying in pain, then he stopped and I heard another voice cursing: the bastard’s fainted, pour some water over him.

“Well, Pődör you have heard what is awaiting you if you not make a sincere confession” my interrogator said “however, you may avoid pain by conferring I give you five minutes to make up your mind.

He offered me another cigarette and leaned back comfortably on his chair.

I was thinking over his offer while he waited silently. They would torture me, and ultimately I would “confess” anyway – I thought – better to do it now.

“All right – I said – what should I confess to?”

“Everything you know about the conspiracy” – the interrogator answered – You must do it in writing he added. As you see, we have already prepared paper and a pen for you. Start writing... You are a professor, after all this is your job.

He left the room and I started writing.

When he came back, I handed him over my draft. He read it carefully and nodded.

“Quite good for a start. But you must give more details..”

As there were no facts to describe, I tried to recall events from novels by Victor Hugo and Eugene Sue with the secret aim of unveiling the humbug during the trial to come...

In a way, the interrogator delivered his promise: after the “detailed confession” was accepted, I was not tortured.

However – it was not possible to unveil the truth during the trial. Even the defense counsel – who was selected by the ÁVO – proclaimed that I was guilty of high treason.. as if he were the prosecutor.

László Rajk “confessed” – allegedly he had secretly got a promise that, though sentenced to death, he would not be executed, but would be given another name and would be allowed to leave the country under an alias.

The “People’s Court” sentenced him to death and he was executed together with other defendants. Others got life or long prison sentences.

Pődör spent five years in one of the worst prisons of the ÁVO.. the sentence was squashed and he was released some years after Stalin’s death.

There was a young woman working beside me. Her shining brown eyes, her curly black hair, her creole face gave her beauty an exotic touch. She was also highly educated: Györgyi Tarisznyás had a ph.d. in linguistics and until her arrest, she was teaching literature in a high school in her home town in Southern Hungary.

Neither Györgyi, nor her parents had anything to do with politics. Her father was a respected public servant.. besides her teaching job, Györgyi was a keen horsewoman and a celebrated beauty.

Györgyi's tragedy began with the blossoming of romance.

In the region where the Tarisznyás family lived, there were some excellent hunting fields. In the forests, prize-winning deers, roe-deers and wild boars were brought down during the hunting season. Many members of the country's social elite – including diplomats – regularly went hunting there.

A Yugoslav diplomat who often hunted there – became a frequent visitor to the Tarisznyás house.

Some time later the young man proposed – and Györgyi was already his fiancée when the trial against László Rajk began.

As the diplomat was an attaché at the Yugoslav embassy in Budapest, the ÁVO wanted to use Györgyi as an eye witness to the alleged secret meetings of Rankovich, one of Tito's close collaborators with László Rajk. They were allegedly preparing a "conspiracy" against the rule of "true" i.e. soviet-type communism in Eastern Europe, with the aim of extending the influence of Tito's ideas. At that time Soviet propaganda called him the "chained dog of the imperialists".

After weeks of imprisonment and cruel torture, Györgyi signed the affidavit according to which she was an eye witness at meetings, heard the conspirators talking of Hungary's leaving the Soviet camp, and of killing communist leaders loyal to Moscow.

Although not a defendant but a witness, Györgyi and members of her family were imprisoned.

After a year of imprisonment, she was unexpectedly lead from her cell into the courtyard of the prison where the executions used to take place. She was ordered to stand under the gallows, and a prison officer told her that her sentence had been commuted and she would be hanged.

She was left standing there for half an hour with a rope around her neck. Then an officer appeared, removed the rope and told her smiling that she would not be hanged, but could return to her cell.

It was a “practical joke.”

“What happened to your family” I asked Györgyi one day, while we were working on the manuscripts of a book. We had the exciting job of editing an illustrated biography of Tivadar Csontváry, the Hungarian painter, whose work reminded me of the paintings of “Douanier” Rousseau.

Csontváry died of starvation and illness half a century earlier and he was forgotten. His art was had just been “re-discovered” after some of his paintings were exhibited at the Brussels World Fair and became a world success.

“My mother was released a few months before me” Györgyi answered.

“And your father?”

“He died in prison” she whispered.

At that moment the phone rang. I picked up the receiver.

“May I speak to Miss Tarisznyás?” a voice asked.

I handed over the receiver to her.

After she took it, I heard Györgyi say: “Yes. Yes.. I shall be there..”

She put down the receiver... her face was pale and frzen like a mask.

I helped her to an armchair, a few minutes later she was able to drink the water I offered her.

“Are you ill? What happened?” I asked. She did not answer immediately.

“I got a call from the Ministry of the Interior.. I have to be there tomorrow at ten a.m.” she mumbled. Later, after she left the room, I discovered that she wet herself of fear.

The call from the Ministry of the Interior proved to be just invitation” An official of the Ministry Petrovich, was commissioned “to look after” the recently released political prisoners – and he wanted to ask Györgyi whether she needed some special medical treatment because of her spinal problems. She needed it – in fact she had to wear a kind of “iron corset” during the next years of her short life. The illness, caused by the torture in prison, killed her a few years after her release.

Another colleague, working in a neighboring “cubicle” was Pál Justus – a social democrat, and a well-known theoretician of his party during the pre-war years. His theories were much debated, nonetheless he was one of the leaders of the clandestine party during the German occupation he became a member of the coalition government after the war.

a man in his forties with slightly graying hair and a charming smile – Justus was a ladies’ man, he had a long history of love affairs... while his faithful but not very attractive wife looked after household and the children. Once I met Justus at the mountain resort on Galyatető hill – formerly a luxus hotel taken over by the communist state with “special apartments” for members of the ruling elite. Justus was there with his pretty secretary-who was also one of his occasional lovers. While I interviewed him – he got a phone call from his caring wife, who wanted to inform him, that she was sending by special messenger medicine which he had left at home.

But these were already events of the past.. After five years spent in prison Justus was one of the readers for the publishing house. Silver-haired and haggard, without the charming smile around his lips – he confided to me a secret which he had told anybody else until then.

“During the first two years of imprisonment I was in solitary confinement – he said – and gradually I lost all touch with reality: facts and dreams, memories and visions were whirling in my mind. I was afraid I was going mad – and to save my mind, I decided to concentrate on some mental activity. As I knew most of Shakespeare’s sonnet by heart, I started translating them in my mind. After two years, when finally I got paper, pen and ink... I put the originals and their Hungarian translation on paper.

A few days after our conversation, Justus handed me over the manuscript.

I spent many evenings reading the sonnets and Justus’ translations. The LX-th I read with special awe:

“Like as the waves make towards the pebbled shore
So do our minutes hasten to their end:
Each changing place with that which goes before.
In sequent toil all forwards do contend.
Nativity, once in the main of light
Crawly to maturity, wherewith being crown’d
Crooked eclipses ‘gainst his glory fight,
And Time that gave doth now his gift confound.
Time doth transfix the flourish set on youth
And delves the parallels in beauty’s brow,
Feed on the rarities of nature’s truth,
And nothing stands but for his scythe to mow:
- And yet to times in hope my verse shall stand,
Praising thy worth, despite his cruel hard.”

.. Justus was alone with Shakespeare's sonnets in his cell.. In the third year of his imprisonment, when his solitary confinement ended, and he got a companion in his cell... he discovered that he had forgotten how to speak.

"I had to relearn to speak" he confided to me

After some time Shakespeare's sonnets and Justus' Hungarian translations were published in a bi-lingual volume. As I am writing these lines, I have the book with Justus' dedication in front of me on my desk.. and I remember the happy smile on his face when he handed me the book.

He died unexpectedly three years after he was released from prison. The reason for his sudden death was a heart-attack. The same happened to László Pődör. He was found dead in a forest in the Buda hills. He died while jogging there, alone.

The name of the English reader at the publishing house was well-known abroad. He was Noel H. Field – originally a high ranking functionary of the Department of State, Washington D.C., later on, during World War II. a director of a humanitarian organization in Switzerland which tried – and in some cases succeeded – in rescuing people persecuted by the Nazis in Germany.

The descendant of an old family of Quakers, and a true Christian, Noel believed in the lofty ideas. of communism – and after the war he left Switzerland to live "in a country where socialism is being built"

His choice was Budapest, while his brother settled in Prague.

After a courtly welcome both Fields were accused of "spying for the imperialists" and imprisoned by the respective KGBs.

Noel was in his early sixties when I first met him. A soft spoken, tall, slim man, he never spoke of his years in prison, though I was a frequent visitor to his home on the slopes of Orbán Hill in Buda. The story of the house itself is worth telling, because it was

characteristic of Noel's. When he was released from prison he was given a villa on Gellért Hill.. a beautiful house, originally owned by a wealthy business man, which was expropriated by the communist authorities and declared "state property". Noel and his wife had been living in this comfortable home for some years, when – with the coming of détente – the original owner of the house, was allowed to return to Budapest from a camps on the Great Plain where he had been interned.

Timidly he sent Noel a letter,, in which he told his sad story: his wife had died during internment,his son was not allowed to study at university... and after their return to Budapest they had no home to got.

Noel answered immediately: he would return the house to its original owner – he declared – as soon as he could find another home..

As Noel had inherited a considerable amount of money and it was duly transferred from the USA to Budapest, he had the means and was able to buy a house and return the villa to its owner.

I visited often the Fields in the their new house at Pethényi street.

Both Noel and Hertha were in poor health. He had trouble with his back and she had neuralgia and spent most nights awake because she could not sleep.

"I was made to believe that Noel had been executed – she confided to me – at the same time he was told that I had died in prison. We were each kept in solitary confinement, both of us thinking that the other was dead."

I was brooding about the special methods of mental torture invented by the Hungarian followers of the KGB, when Hertha showed me two beautiful puppets: a Pierrot and a Pierrette: they were both graceful like ballet dancers and Pierrette had an angelic smile on her face.

"Touch them please" Hertha said "and tell me guess what they are made of."

“I did as she said but was none the wiser. I just admired the mysterious beauty of the two puppets.

“ I made them out of the soft parts of the bread which I was given to eat...I saved as much of it as I could to make figurines..” Hertha revealed the “secret.” “I was never gluttonous she added smiling.

She started reserving the soft parts of the bread and making figurines secretly, as she was afraid that she would be punished for this activity – she told me – but a guard discovered one of the hidden puppets and became just infatuated with it... He did not confiscate it.. but asked Hertha to make a similar puppet for him too. He also gave her an extra portion of bread for this purpose. Later she was asked to make puppets by other guards too... even the commander of the prison asked for one. On her release from the prison, Hertha was allowed to take two puppets with her, the two I held gently in my hands, admiring their beauty and charm.

At that time I started to write a book: Imre Csreépfalvi asked me to write “The Book of Hungarian Wines”. He realized that Tokaj Aszu, the Bull’s Blood of Eger and other great Hungarian wines were mass-produced for export to the soviet knion and that the vintners wine somers had lost interest in producing wines good quality: We both thought that a book which evoked the history of the “classic” Hungarian wine regions, the traditions of making great wines, would give food for thought both to wine makers and the public in general. In fact, my “Book of Hungarian Wines” was published several times in Hungarian, English, German and French editions.. and perhaps it made some contribution to the renaissance of Hungarian wines which is in blossom today.

While gathering material for the book, I traveled all over the country. I explored the caves at Tokaj and listened to old wine makes who explained how the “aszu dough” was made of grapes transformed by the “noble rot”: I toured the hills surrounding Lake Balaton,

meeting farmers who still produced the legendary “Gray Friar” and the “Kéknyelű” wines, I visited Eger, the homeland of red wines...

While traveling all over the country and meeting people everywhere I felt both anger and optimism. Anger against the communist dictatorship and the continuing Soviet occupation of the country – and an overwhelming optimism that things may change. People were listening to broadcasts by the Voice of America, the BBC, Radio Free Europe.. It was already common knowledge that infighting was going on in the ruling elite – between the hard-liners and the reformists who wanted – to use the term later coined by Gorbachev – to create “socialism with a human face”.

I personally was not involved in politics. I continued writing my books. After the “Book of Hungarian Wines” I wrote a book on the cultural history of European gastronomy and following that a book entitled “The chocolate king” - evoking the history of the chocolate factory owned by my family before communism.

Politics – nonetheless – entered my life.

Miklós Gimes, an influential columnist to the communist daily Szabad Nép, was suddenly sacked from his job – and from the party elite – and he became a simple reader – a colleague of mine – at the publishing house in Váci street.

A stubby little man in his thirties, Gimes was an ardent communist. He joined the party during World War II.. as an idealist: he thought that after the years of horrors, communism would create a peaceful and just society.

He was wrong of course, but it took time for him to realize his mistake and join the reformist line of Imre Nagy. Following the struggle within the party – which ended for the moment with the victory of the hard liners – he not only lost his job, but became a kind of outcast. like us.. with the difference that he maintained his contacts in politics. Gimes was in

constant touch with the “reformists” headed by Imre Nagy and he took part in meetings which – as I realized later – were preparing the revolution of 1956.

He worked in a neighboring cubicle – very close to mine – and while we had our espresso, he sometimes informed me about political developments.

Gimes thought that there would just be a peaceful revolution which would topple the regime of the hard-liners-at that time lead by Ernő Gerő, an emissary of the KGB to Spain during the Civil War –without the use of force.

“The Soviet Army will leave the country under pressure from the Western Powers” he told me during one of our conversations which took place at the “Muskátli” bar.

“They would not risk World War III” he added.

For a few weeks it seemed that his optimism was well founded. Outspoken, fiery debates were taking place at the Petőfi Circle – in the big hall of the Club of the Honvéd Army: A poem by Gyula Illyés titled “On tyranny” was printed on leaflets and distributed all over the country...

Gimes was impatient. He took part in the preparation of a mass rally with the aim of starting a kind of “chain reaction”... the time of the mass demonstration was postponed several times.

I shall never forget an event which happened during this period of suspense.

We went down to the “Muskátli” and as we returned, Gimes found the door to his room locked.. and there was no key to hand.

Without waiting the master key or other kind of “compromise solution” – he attacked the door with his shoulder and entered the room with a victorious smile on his lips.

Non did the look for a “compromise solution” after the revolution was crushed by the Soviet for Army. He arranged the flight of his wife and two children to the Western frontier – but he remanded in Budapest, trying to continue the fight. He was soon arrested became one

of the defendants at the trial of Imre Nagy. He was condemned to death and executed. Many years later, I met his son. He is also called Miklós Gimes and he is a noted liberal journalist in Switzerland.

The mass demonstration which I mentioned previously, took place on 23rd October, 1956 in Buda, at Bem-square, around the statue of General Jozef Bem. a hero of the 1848/49 war against Habsburg rule.

Thousands and thousands of people from all parts of the city marched with flags and posters over the Margit bridge to Buda, in festive mood. Even the soldiers stationed in the barracks opposite the statue of General Bem, left the barracks and joined the peaceful demonstration.

Speaker after speaker addressed the rally. They spoke of freedom, democracy the independence of Hungary. The crowd shouted "éljen"s and started singing the National Anthem.. when a voice was heard

"They are shooting at the Radio"

In fact, a battle was already underway in downtown Pest, in front of the headquarters of the Hungarian Radio. Russian tanks and units of the ÁVO were shooting at the demonstrators – Molotov – cocktails- bottles filled with kerosene – were thrown at the tanks in response.

Later on a demonstration took place at the Parliament – and sharpshooters of the ÁVO fired with machine guns at the crowd...

I do not want to recall the events of the revolution – the temporary withdrawal of the Soviet Army, their return to launch an all-out offensive on November 4th 1956, the appeal of Prime Minister Imre Nagy to the United Nations declaring Hungary's neutrality and leaving the Warsaw Pact the non-intervention of the Western Powers I am just recalling a few personal experiences: one friend after the other announced by phone that they were leaving

the country for good. Soviet tanks shooting at blocks of flats and killing the inhabitants .. including a friend, a photographer in his home, just as he was developing some negatives. Queing for bread in front of a bakery ... machine-gun fire... the crowd dispersing.. and reassembling a few minutes later because “one must eat, anyway”. Houses on fire ... corpses on the streets... Imre Nagy and his colleagues given asylum in the Yugoslav Embassy, then transported to Romania.. After they were returned to Hungary later, the mock trial at the Főp utca military prison in Budapest.. the executions.

Tens of thousands of people left Hungary in those weeks and months. At first, it was quite easy to leave the country because the frontiers were unguarded. Later on it became more and more difficult, but it was still possible to cross the border clandestinely, aided by people living in villages on the Austro-Hungarian border ... Ultimately mines were placed, fences of barbed wire mounted and the frontiers were finally closed.

I could not leave. My ex-wife (we were divorced in 1954) wanted to stay and I was afraid I would not see my daughter Sylvia, again. Also I did not wish to leave my old mother alone. And I wanted to write the books which had in mind.

For better or worse I stayed.

Goulash communism – with some tidbits

It was a chilly November afternoon I 1960 when I got the phone call.

As I lifted the receiver, I was astounded to hear Iván Boldizsár's characteristic, throaty voice saying "hello".

To my event greater astonishment, he said that he wanted to meet me urgently because he was about to launch a new magazine and he "wanted very much to ask my advice" about the project.

I was amazed. Boldizsár was a brilliant journalist, a charming raconteur – he allegedly coined most of the famous Budapest jokes which were circulating all over the city... but we were not on very friendly terms since my return from Rome and since I was dismissed from my job as a journalist. He was a kind of a Hungarian Beaumarchais – he did not like to meet people who were not in favor.

Nonetheless I paid a visit to his home the next afternoon. I was curious as to what he had in mind.

Boldizsár lived in a sumptuous villa on the Buda hills with his French wife, Yvette and with his three teen-aged children.

He greeted me in his study which – together with his library and his bedroom occupied the whole first floor of the villa. We had coffee on the big terrace, looking out-over the panorama of the Buda hills.

"I was given this princely home during my late deputy ministership and they have forgotten to take it back" he said smiling ironically.

While I was sipping my coffee, he took a book from a shelf in the library.

"Do you know this book?" he asked.

I knew it of course. “Dánia, a gazdag parasztok országa” (Denmark the land of rich peasants) was written by Boldizsár during the thirties, after a research trip to Denmark. Hungary was at that time a land of very poor peasants, hundreds of thousands were forced to emigrate, because they had no land, no livelihood.

“Well.. I admired your courage at that time” I answered cautiously.

“While there is not much to be admired at present” he remarked sourly.

Indeed there wasn't very much. It was common knowledge that during the period of reprisals following the revolution, Boldizsár was arrested just for a day by the KGB and was soon released unharmed. After this curious event he started a series of commentaries on Hungarian radio, pleading for peaceful collaboration with the so-called “revolutionary workers and peasants government”. In all probability he had come to some agreement under duress...and he started supporting the new regime.

I was leafing through the book, silently.

“.. there is not much to be admired at present – Boldizsár repeated – “yet the situation may improve. They are becoming increasingly aware that coexistence requires much more than warding off a nuclear war. It requires human contact, cultural exchange..”

It sounded like one of his radio talks. “Coexistence” was the slogan of the day.

I started to laugh.

“Go on Iván” I said “tell me what you have in store for me. You did not call me just to discuss Khrushchev's logos, I hope”.

“You are right, Zoltán” he said, also laughing “still.. coexistence has something to do with it.”

He stopped talking, because a maid entered the room. She brought a bottle of Pinot Gris wine and two glasses.

“I’ve succeeded in selling Aczél the idea of starting an English-language magazine.. and following this he succeeded in selling it Kádár” Boldizsár said meaningfully, tugging at his short, graying moustache. “I am working hard on the project, hut I need your help.”

He was too cautious to tell me the whole truth, but during our conversation I gradually guessed it.

György Acél – the eminence grise of the communist regime – favored the opening of cultural avenues to the Western world and he persuaded Kádár to give the green light to star the English language magazine. He even conceded that the manuscripts could be forwarded without any censorship from the editorial offices right to the printers. He knew of course, that Boldizsár would be cautious enough not to publish anything unacceptable to the regime.

“I have decided to follow in the footsteps of a prestigious magazine of the past.. it will be called The New Hungarian Quarterly” Boldizsár announced proudly.

The Hungarian Quarterly which he referred to was published during the thirties, sponsored bay ex-prime minister Count István Bethlen “with the aim of fostering political and cultural relations between Hungary and the Anglo-Saxon world” according to the statement printed on its first page. Its contributors were Hungarian and English authors, but there was also an “American advisory committee” including Nicholas N. Roosevelt.

I doubted whether, after the crushing of the revolution, in Soviet-occupied Hungary, Boldizsár’s plan aim was feasible.. but I did not say so. I waited without saying anything.

Finally he told me why he wanted to me.

“I have been working on the project for two months but somehow I can not succeeding to bringing things together. I cannot find translators who are good enough. I can’t find the right English readers. I have problems with the sub-editors the printers.”

Now I understood his problem. I had been an editor at the Corvina Publishing House for five years, I had experience in publishing books by Hungarian authors in English... also I knew how to deal with sub-editors and printers.

“Unfortunately, József Balogh is not with us anymore “I remarked, alluding to the dedicated, monkish editor of the “old” Hungarian Quarterly. Balogh was killed by the Nazis because of his affiliation with the magazine... Count István Bethlen disappeared in a Soviet prison, and died there during the fifties.

“But you are fortunately here. “ Boldizsár said “and as you have survived successfully.. I hope that you will survive this venture too.. that is if you accept of course.

I took the job. The first issue of The New Hungarian Quarterly appeared in the spring of 1960.

Looking back now, from a distance of four decades, I have to admit that the magazine of which I was a co-founder, was a typical product of “goulash communism” – of the soft dictatorship which declared that “everybody who is not against us, is with us”. Previously, during the hard rule of Rákosi’s Stalinist regime –everything that was not officially permitted, was prohibited. Now... anything that was not officially prohibited, was permitted. The American or the English reader may consider this as a play on words, but in our everyday reality it was of immense importance. It gave us the possibility to transform the New Hungarian Quarterly into a vehicle for contemporary Hungarian literature and art. To present works unknown to the world – which constituted part of the common cultural heritage of mankind, we thought.

One of the “great achievements” of goulash communism was that once in three years one got an exit visa in his or her passport – I was allowed to spend two weeks in Great Britain.

In Glasgow I met the son of one the first Hungarian Olympic champions, Alfréd Hajós. Andrew Hargrave was a journalist of the Glasgow Herald and when I mentioned to him that I would like to meet a poet who could help us render Hungarian poetry in to English, he was enthusiastic. We both agreed that Hungarian poetry is some of the best in the world – but it is unknown, because poetry can only be rendered by true poets.. and no English poet had done it until then.

A few days later Andrew introduced me to Edwin Morgan, a Scottish poet, lecturer at Glasgow university. A young man, with a boyish smile, Edwin was a well-known poet in Scotland – and as a Scotsman, he nurtured a deep sympathy towards the culture of a small nation isolated by its language, which belonged neither to the Indo-German, nor to the of Slav family of languages. We decided that he would get interlinear translations of the poems and also tapes so that he listen to the “music” of the Hungarian original verse. The project worked: in one of the forthcoming issues, a poem by Miklós Radnóti – the “Hungarian Garcia Lorca” – was published in Edwin Morgan’s translation:

Forced March

Crazy when safe on the ground to get up and walk again
the man stirs knees and ankles like some galvanized thing of pain
but he still follows the road, you’d think he’d wings to lift him
and the ditch is not his friend, he daren’t be a drifter
and if you ask why not, he’ll maybe tell you yet
he has a wife in wait for him and a les mad, ugly death.
What a crazy piety when you wonder for ages
hearth and home have blistered to the dry wind raging,
house-wall struck flat, the plum-tree bare,
and night on the homestead crawling with fear.

Or if I could believe it – not only my heart
holding what I must hold to, but a home, waiting late:
could it be yet –as once on the old cool porch
the bees of peace hummed while plum jam grew rich
and late summer stillness baked on the sleepy garden
fruits rocked naked in the leaves and Fanni
stood with her fair hair by the tawny hedgerow,
and the slow morning lowly tracked its shadow –
but this can still be! The moon is so round tonight!
Stay wait my friend, shout at me! I'm on my feet!

Translated by Edwin Morgan

The forced march ended with the death of the poet. While marching towards a concentration camp, he was stopped and shot by a Nazi guard. After the war his body was exhumed and a notebook was found in his pocket. The poem – and some others which he jotted down in his notebook, helped to identify him.

I met Fanni, his widow many years later in her cottage at Leányfalu on the Danube Bend. Her hair was gray, she was a tiny old woman, a retired teacher, in her eighties. She never remarried.

Later on we succeeded in getting a number of American and English poets interested – Bruce Berlind, Jascha Kessler, William Jay Smith, Eric Mottram, Daniel Hoffman and others, and contemporary Hungarian poetry began to appear regularly in the magazine translated by them. We also published essays on artists whose names and work had until then rarely appeared in the Hungarian press, because they were considered “decadent” and “following western trends.” Up to that time, so called socialist realism was the only acceptable style of artistic self-expression.

When I visited Margit Anna, the painter, in her studio in a quiet, narrow street in Buda and told her that we wanted to publish an article about her art with reproductions of ten or twelve paintings in a forthcoming issue of the magazine, she was moved to tears. She was a surrealist, consequently her paintings had not been shown for many years. After an article written by art critic Csaba Sik appeared in the magazine, a little art gallery at Szentendre had the courage to exhibit Margit Anna’s art. In a relatively small space, they arranged a show of her oeuvre spanning more than thirty years. I was present at the opening of the exhibition. It was a revelation to all of us there. Anna’s themes were inspired by folk art, not however, of the kind found in museums: she evoked the Hungarian village of the present – modified by an urban iconography which filtered through into traditional village life.

Otherwise there was no sign of a forthcoming democracy in Hungary at that time. With the goulash we had to swallow unsavory tidbits too.

I remember the sour expression on Boldizsár's face as he handed me the manuscript of an article bearing the name of Imre Miklós. Head of the State Office for religious affairs, with the remark:

"You won't be delighted by this, I am afraid."

Indeed I wasn't. In his article Miklós quoted statistics about the communist state's financial support for churches, and laws and decrees to prove that, after the persecution of the churches during Rákosi's stalinist regime, there was now perfect harmony between the state and the churches and that there was religious freedom in Hungary. This was "double speak" in the Orwellian sense of course. Though the houses of worship were open and some priests were allowed to do their jobs – there was no religious freedom in the real sense of the word. Most Roman Catholic orders remained forcibly dissolved, the order of my benefactor Father Elek was one of them: many protestant pastors were still ousted from their jobs – like Gyula Nagy, who saved my mother's life, he had to work in the foundry of the Csepel Iron Works.. and later was forced to emigrate.

"There are too many half-truths and lies in this article" I told Boldizsár angrily, after I had read it.

"We must publish it nonetheless.. this is the price we have sometimes to pay to be able to publish the truth too."

We were both bitter. Boldizsár was consoled, however, by his success in public life. He was elected president of the Pen Club, she was a popular TV personality and a member of the Hungarian Peace Council.

I was not involved in politics. The editorial office of the magazine was on the first floor of an ugly block of flats at the crossing of Rákóczi út and Szentkirályi utca and while doing my daily work. I tried to escape into the past.

László Vértes, an old friend was my guide to the enchanted castle of the past which I longed for. A man in his early forties, László had black, bushy hair, big, strong hands and when he was told a joke, a wide grin appeared on his face. This happened quite often because he liked puns. He always had one or two jokes in store.

“Would you come with me to visit the underworld of Budapest?” he asked me one day, while I was observing the funny of the two little, reddish hamsters which he kept in his house. The little animals lived in a box, and while I was visiting, at the Vértes allowed them to walk up and down a carpet of the dining room floor.

“I am not sure whether I would” I answered cautiously because I had the feeling that he might have a drinking bout in mind.

László liked whiskey very much.

“Come on don’t be prudish” he laughed “I was just inviting you to visit the caves under the villas and gardens of the Rose Hill.

László lived in a house on Rózsadomb – an elegant neighborhood – I didn’t imagine that there might be caves practically under our feet there.

“Where are these caves?” I wondered.

“As I told you, right here, under us” László answered laughing “if you make up your mind and you are willing to put on one of those overalls there, we soon be on our way to the caves.”

There were in fact, blue overalls on the couch. László put on one of them. I followed suit. He put the hamsters back into their box and we left. He didn’t bother to close the door outside. “Ági will soon be back” he waved nonchalantly. Ági, his wife was one of those over-

emancipated communist activist women who knew everything better than you and was always eager to discuss questions of ideology. They didn't get on very well.

On our way we were joined by Sanyi Pécsi, the actor, who lived nearby. He was already waiting for us in front of his house.

Somewhat overweight, always with a jovial smile on his face, Pécsi looked like a buffoon – but your first impression immediately changed when he started to speak on the stage. He was a genius of an actor, indeed. He never attended the Academy of Dramatic Art – he graduated at the Sárospatak College in literary criticism and English – nonetheless when he first appeared on the stage in Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*, he was an instant success.

"I have lived in this neighborhood for ten years but I never guessed that there were caves under my house" he mused, while he joined us.

"Are you sure that there are no caves under your theatre?" "László teased him. Sanyi was known for his distaste for the "party line" and as he gave vent often to his anger, his situation at the Madách Theatre. was to put it mildly, shaky. On more than one occasion, only his unrivalled talent had saved him from being sacked.

"I am afraid that those caves are deeper than yours" Sanyi said sourly.

Among the villas and gardens, László guided us to an empty lot. There was a gray, iron trap-door in the center of the plot. László opened it and showed us the narrow ladder inside, which led into what seemed like a deep, dark emptiness.

Using a torch László climbed down first and we followed him. From the mild almost erotic, warmth of the summer afternoon, we descended into the underworld.

In the torchlight we arrived into a surprisingly big hall. Hundreds of white and yellow stone roses glistened on the walls. In the "Hall of Giants" as it was called, - there was a hot lake hundreds of thousands years ago, when the Danube flowed 2-300 meters higher than nowadays – explained László – and the aragonite roses originate from those times. Then

through a narrow stone tunnel, we had to press our bodies into the “Palace of Lace” – which was given this name by Hubert Kessler, the first explorer of the caves, because the walls there were covered with snow-white lace-like plates, formed by calcite crystals. Further – and deeper – in a smaller, semi-circular room we found a dazzling variety of forms and colors: stalactites and stalagmites, forming miniature waterfalls and ships, forests with pine trees, with a little imagination one could even see Snow-white and the Seven Dwarves.

“The first explorers found the bones of wool haired rhinoceros and giant mammoth teeth in the Hell of Giants” László said. “Here, in the heart of the caves a couple of bottles and empty cans were found recently which were probably left behind by people who were hiding here during the holocaust” he added pensively.

“Who were they?” Pécsi asked “What happened to them? Did they survive?”

László did not answer. He just shook his head.

Nothing was known about their fate. Later I tried also to investigate, but of no avail. Nowadays, many years after our first tour of the caves- I drive along Pusztaszeri út which crosses Rose Hill from time to time and from my car I am glancing at the recently built entrance to the caves. There is also a restaurant and a car park.

After the reconnaissance of caves I started exploring other “secrets” of the city I was born in: the history of its bridges which were destroyed during World War II. and rebuilt gradually during the subsequent decades; during the restoration of the mediaeval Buda Castle I was lucky enough to attend excavations with my archeologist friend László Zoltay, who discovered and dug up remains of gothic sculptures from their graves. They had been removed during the rebuilding of the castle in the 15th century and buried in a rather shallow “grave” in front of the present National Gallery.

I made some other “discoveries” too – and ultimately published a book on my experiences. The book became an instant success. After several reprints, I was asked by the

Municipal Council of Budapest to write the text of a script, for an exhibition, which would find a place in various European capitals Rome among others.

I was enthusiastic, because I knew I would enjoy the work.. I was always a very visual type of person and I like taking part in a process where my writing is transformed into forms and colors. Also János Hantos, the chairman of the Municipal Council promised that I would “accompany” the exhibition and stay a week in each city where it was to be shown: in Vienna, Paris and in London too..

I called immediately István Gergely , a brilliant artist, and an old friend, who had already designed a number of successfully exhibitions and during long sessions in his studio, we discussed how to visualize my text. We were on the same wavelength: we both wanted to recall the urban heritage of the three towns: Buda, Pest and Óbuda which were united in 1872 to form the capital city Budapest, We soon learned, however that the secretary of the municipal organization of the Communist Party had some ideas of his own. Zoltán Szépvölgyi wanted the “historical role and the presence of the Communist Party to be emphasized” and when we presented Gergely’s design to the leadership of the Municipal Council, they bluntly vetoed it. Though the statue of Stalin had been removed and destroyed during the 1956 revolution – Lenin’s was still standing. Also the “mass demonstrations” on April 4th , May 1st and November 7th still took place. “Why are there no photos of these events demonstrating the Hungarian people’s allegiance and gratitude to Party in our project?” Szépvölgyi asked.

Mostly I am soft spoken and try to avoid sharp debates, but the secretary’s demand made me angry and I started to give him a harsh reply which could have caused a disaster – as was shown two years later, when Szépvölgyi became the chairman of the Municipal Council and immediately sacked dozens of people who were on his “black list” before he became the boss.

“This is just a preliminary draft, comrade secretary” Hants interrupted we will submit the final project to you in a few weeks.”

He knew of course, that Szépvölgyi would be in the Soviet Union at that time, it was common knowledge that he would spend six months at some Leninist Academy.

Three weeks later the “final” project was accepted unanimously. Naturally we did not change a thing.

The exhibition was organized in Rome six months later, in 1962. Count Sforza, was dead and with the exception of one “usciera” – i.e. waiter – there were just new faces in the Associazione Stampa Estera at Piazza San Silvestro. Nonetheless, I was glad to be back in the Eternal City where an unforgettable chapter of my life had taken place. Our exhibition was mounted in the Marcus Aurelius Baths – it was a very stimulating experience to arrange the photos, objects, maps and designs among two thousand year old walls, where the philosopher-emperor liked to idle his time away – when he was not waging war – and philosophizing about peace at the frontiers of his empire.

Quite unexpectedly a face from my past in Rome appeared: Vincente Lombardi, count Sforza’s press secretary. He left his visiting card at the exhibition for me – with a message that he wanted to meet me during my stay in Rome.

It was one of those unforgettable mild, spring evenings in Rome when we meet at Café Greco. The Spanish Steps nearby were full of tourists and Romans who like to idle away their time, standing around the boat carved out of stone... Vincente was already waiting for me at one of Greco’s round marble tables .. I hardly recognized him, the slim young man with crispy black hair had become the braying middle aged CEO of a publishing house, with a respectable paunch. Only his sardonic smile remained the same.

“What happened to you after your return to Hungary?” he asked after I set down at the table and ordered a famous Greco cappuccino. We hardly got any information. We knew that

you were dismissed from your job, but after that we received no news at all about you. We were afraid that you might have been imprisoned.”

The waiter came with my capuccio. It was as strong and as hot as it used to be when we were both “regulars” at Greco.

“Miraculously I was not imprisoned.. I was just declared a leper because your communists did not win and De Gasperi became prime minister” – I answered. A long silence followed. Then I tried to evoke the mood of the fifties when my former colleagues turned their heads away if we met on the Great Boulevard. It was funny to remember now the time when I became on “Unmensch” for the second time. The first time it happened during the holocaust – the second time during the time of “Hard Line communism.” Now, that I was the deputy editor of an important magazine, the same people who turned away their heads to demonstrate their faith in the Party, became “friends” again. After many years, after the collapse of communism – they will call themselves ex-victims of the defunct regime and columnists of right-wing newspapers. Plus ça change...

“Nothing has changed Here” Vincente remarked smiling “except the course of the lira... and the prices.

I agreed.. in Italy the way of life never changed. The shoemakers did their job unchanged in their small workshops as of old, the pasta was cooked “al dente” in the trattorias. Even the thief, who stole the handbag of the young lady who was sitting besides me in an espresso at Piazza colonna, dropped the bag as I ran after him through the narrow streets, as his predecessors had, smiling, as if to show that he did not mean it seriously –ecco, he dropped the bounty which I picked up, of course.. and allowed him to escape a few moments later.

When I returned to Hungary, an agreeable surprise awaited me there. Many years ago a cousin called Fred Hollis who had emigrated earlier to the USA, spent a few days in

Hungary as a GI, when he was allowed by the Vienna Command of the US Army to visit his family in Budapest. It was quite an event, Fred was sixteen years old when he left Hungary and we had not see him since that time, Uncle Jenő and Aunt Helen – his parents were deeply moved also because Fred brought some goodies unavailable in Budapest at that time, like chocolate bars, coffee, tea and chewing gum, which could be used as currency for buying food and clothes.

I had secret treasures: 500 hundred US dollars which I had succeeded in saving hidden in the frame of a painting. Fortunately it was not hit as our flat in Erkel utca was bombed – and Fred, when leaving, was willing to take the money for safe-keeping in the USA, in case we eventually emigrated.

The emigration did not happen – and after about fifteen years Fred was willing to return he account. Upon my request he did not send it directly to my address in Hungary – but to a firm in the American occupied zone of Austria, which exported used cars. When I arrived from Rome, I got a letter from the car-dealers that a used “Beetle” was shipped to me on the Danube.

I took a taxi to the “Duty Free Port at Csepel.” Many rusty disused ships and cranes. After a few enquiries, I found the office where “imported goods” were handled. A fat officer, seemingly depressed mood, greeted me morosely.

“I don’t know on any car imported from Austria” he said in an unfriendly fashion” you will have to look for it and find it.. though I doubt wether you will succeed.”

I left the office and I was looking for somebody who would help me to look for my Beetle.

“The comrades do not like western cars” said the sttevedore or confidently when I finally found him in a cabin. He was slightly inebriated, but quite friendly – hoping for a

considerable tip, I was sure. "Let us look for your car on the Delia" he said, pointing out a ship anchored nearby.

We climbed on board on the Delia – and there was a gray Beetle on the dock.

My man probably knew of its whereabouts, because he lead me directly to it.

"Have you any papers? he asked.

I did have some of course: they had been sent to me directly by Fred. The stevedore checked the papers carefully and then returned them to me:

"A gift from a capitalist. You must show us a document which indicates the grounds for sending you such a valuable gift!"

"It is a gift from a cousin. Besides, he owes me money.."

The mentioning of money seemingly made an impression. "Perhaps a percentage of the money might be deposited with us." he remarked.

"Well.. perhaps I could do that" I said. "Fifty dollars, if that's alright".

"Hundred" the man said firmly "and no bargaining if you want your car".

I paid the money and the Beetle was soon on the shore. Unfortunately there was no fuel in it, I had to walk a mile to the nearest pumping station with a can. Ultimately I could drive my Beetle to town. There were very few cars on the streets. When I parked in front of the house I was living in, there was general excitement in the neighborhood. During the first night the windcreens wipers disappeared. There was a great shortage of spare parts.

It was relatively easy to get a "red passport" valid for travel to "fraternal states" neighboring Hungary. Thus as the proud owner of a Beetle, I decided to take a trip to a Romania.

As I mentioned earlier I had a "friendly divorce" from my wife and we agreed that Sylvia our daughter who was about 14 years old at the time, would accompany me on my tour.

I packed the car with coffee, canned food, chocolate, sugar, dried mild and some clothes, because I knew that everything was scarce in Romania. Unfortunately a lot of these were confiscated by the Romanian customs, and they gave no pretext for the seizure.

I was led into an office where I was interrogated. Why did I want to travel to Romania? I told them that I wanted to visit relatives. A cousin in Cluj, another in Bucharest.

“Tell me the truth” the officer said, looking at me with piercing eyes “you are a journalist.. you want to write about Romania after you return home. Defamatory articles. “By the way, do you have a camera with you?”

“Yes, I do” I admitted but mainly to take photos of the my relatives, who live in Cluj and somehow survived deportation to Auschwitz when the region belonged to Hungary.”

The officer became more friendly all of a sudden. The Romanians were justly proud, that while from the regions attached to Hungary in 1940, the Jews were deported and killed with few exceptions, they were not deported from Romania and owing to King Michael’s brave resistance to Hitler most of them survived.

“Well.. I think it will be all right for you to write about that” the officer said relaxing... but I do not think that you need to take photos. You must leave your camera here..”

After “depositing” my camera (which I never saw again, of course) we were allowed to proceed on our way. We spent the next day in the home of our relatives. A depressing stay. Magda my mother’s niece was – after the hell of Auschwitz – a living corpse. She could hardly move, she was the editor of a women’s monthly but she could not work in the editorial offices – she read the manuscripts lying in bed. Laci, her husband, worked for “Előre”, a Hungarian language weekly, which was so severely censored that some issues appeared with big white spaces on its pages. Their son Gyuri was preparing to emigrate to Israel.

We were happy to continue our trip in the mountains of Transylvania. The landscape was beautiful beyond description. The trouble was that on many places there were no proper roads at all, sometimes the beetle had to climb over flat rocks, while Sylvia was crouching in the front of the vehicle directing me “to the right” or “to the left” to keep us on the non-existent road and not roll over the precipice. Otherwise she enjoyed the adventurous journey, sleeping in our little tent, cooking on open fire. Visiting the little orthodox churches with lit candles inside and old women kissing the icons darkened with age. We were spending the night at Saint Anna’s lake in our tent. Two cars with Hungarian tourists arrived in the early hours. They were short of gas and we allowed them to siphon some off from our beetle. After changing greetings when they heard my name, one of them asked respectfully:

“Mr Halász.. are you perhaps the Halász from the Szabó Family?”

The “Szabó Family” was and is one of the popular soap operas on Hungarian Radio.

I decided to congratulate the writer of the script Géza Baróthy and the actors after my return to Budapest.

Further into “Dracula Country”, where the real Dracula was not Prince Vlad – but Nicolai Ceaucescu his destruction of villages plan was just being put into action. It must have been the idea of a madman to destroy self-sustaining, ancient villages where people had lived since time immemorial – in order to force the inhabitants to settle in artificially created cities.

In Brassow we met Ödön Hevesi, a cousin of my mother’s. A little, old man, in hospital with lung trouble – he hardly knew who we were when we visited him – nonetheless he was happy to have the attentive listeners as he recounted his experience in the Soviet Union. After the Great War he was contracted for a job as a civil engineer in the Soviet Union. For several years he worked on important projects: building roads and railway lines until the early thirties when his contract was not renewed. He resolved to return with his

family to his home town, Brassov, which in the meantime had become part of Romania. Only his son, eighteen year old Ernő was not allowed to leave with them. He was declared a Soviet citizen and was forced to remain there.

They lost contact for a very long time. After World War II, Hevesi tried to investigate with the help of the International Red Cross – and after a number of years by sheer luck, and attempts by his son, who also asked the Red Cross to search for his family – they were identified by some ingenious official. This is how he got word that Ernő was alive and well, in Moscow.

However this was not enough to establish a family reunion. They had to wait another two years, till a package tour was arranged to Moscow – and finally they met, after almost a quarter of a century. It seems that the “family heritage” worked: without any support Ernő had become a civil engineer, had a good job and a family. The Hevesi family was temporarily reassured – but another war followed and since then they had no news. Ernő disappeared without trace in the turmoil of world War II.

Onwards to Bucharest. The capital city of Romania was a peculiar mix of East and West. Wide avenues and well kept parks, narrow bazaar like thoroughfares and much dirt everywhere. The first day we spent there, Endre Partos, an uncle on my mother’s side, invited us to dinner in a posh restaurant. The next day I fell ill with devastating diarrhea which kept me in bed (and near the toilet) for a week. Sylvia, in the meantime enjoyed seeing Sándor Kányádi, the poet, who came to visit us and even wrote some verse for her. Endre – who was affectionately called Bandi by all of us – was a well known physician. He used to be gynecologist to Mrs. Groza, the wife of a previous prime minister of Romania. However Bandi was now out of favor with the new regime. Following ancient Byzantine rules, he even lost his job at the Gynecology Clinic and was now working in a district surgery.

A year or two after our visit he would die of some heart trouble, his wife could commit suicide and Marika, their daughter would emigrate to the USA.

From Bucharest the Beetle took us to the Black Sea. It was like traveling into the past: there were water buffaloes on the fields, nomad gypsy camps beside the roads. All of a sudden a truck appeared with a trailer which was not fastened on well and switched from one side of the road, to the other. I stopped the car and prayed the trailer would glide to the other side as the truck took us over. We were lucky, the trailer did not hit us we proceeded on our way.

In Constanza, I could understand Ovid perfectly well. While interned there by the Emperor he preferred to die than to stay in Constanza another year. There was dirt everywhere, heat and the odor of purifying fish along the beaches. The three or four stories high concrete blocks of the "hotels" built by the socialist regime for western tourists in the hope that they would shower the beach with millions of German marks and US dollars. were empty. The beaches however were crowded, mainly with students, who spent two or three weeks there at the expense of the state.

The ball game being played on the beach by some students was interrupted by a group carrying a curious bundle. They informed us that they were carrying a dead comrade in the bundle – he had drowned in an unexpected undercurrent while swimming not far from the shore.

In between the comings and goings on the beach many people were smearing their faces and their bodies with the black mud which allegedly had a curative effect. Hundreds of pseudo – black men were lying or sitting and chatting on the beach, expecting some miraculous healing.

We wouldn't have discovered him, but Géza Vida, the sculptor recognized us. He washed the mud from his face and body and we had lunch together in a Beach restaurant. He

fought in the ranks of the Bolsheviks during the Great Revolution – and now he was a “sacred cow” in communist Romania: he had been awarded all the existing honors, he was a Member of Parliament and lavishly paid for the wooden sculptures he carved from the trunks of old trees.

I didn't dare to ask him, why he looked unhappy and was comforting himself by drinking one cup of “sligovica” after the other. Later on I was told by Endre Partos, that Vida's home village had been recently “liquidated” – that is, the inhabitants were forced to settle in a town while their houses were destroyed. “The liquidation of villages is one of the great aims of Ceaucescu the ‘Conducator’. I was told”. He wants to transform agricultural Romania into a modern industrial state.. also a communist one of course.”

We spent two days in a village in one of the oldest settlements on the Black Sea coast. There lived Tartars, descendants of Ghengis Khan's people, who ruled great parts of Asia and Europe during the 13th century.

Sylvia was enthusiastic – she learned about the Mongol invasion of Hungary recently, she was very keen to meet the offspring of the Tartars.

The little village was surprisingly clean – we rent a room in a peasant house and thought there was no bathroom of course, but we found a wash bowl, a big jug full of water, towels and surprisingly, there were no bed bugs. We had a good night's sleep.. I even had a mystical experience: a donkey, a cow and two goats were standing motionless in the courtyard as I crossed it at night to reach the “toilet” – which was just a hole in a little hut. The animals looked at me benevolently, the shimmering moonlight shroud the scene like a silver veil.. I hoped that I shall find the little hole in the dark hut.

After our meeting with “socialism Ceaucescu style” Hungary looked like paradise on earth. Not for nothing was the country called “the merriest barracks in the camp” on our return trip we were comforted to see that there were many more consumer goods in the shops,

and though the peasants were forced to join “agricultural producing cooperatives” – the villages were not liquidated as in Romania and bathrooms and water toilets were installed in new village house. Unfortunately this was only half of the whole truth. Beneath the guise of material well-being, there was no social peace and the lava of general discontent was sizzling. Though I was not an economist, I could perceive that the “deficit spending” which was prevailing since the early time of the Kádár regime was leading towards catastrophe. János Fekete, the head of the National Bank allegedly returned from his trips from the West.. with millions of US dollars and German Marks but the money was wasted and the national debt was growing dangerously.

Professor József Bognár was a member of the editorial board of our magazine –and I met him not just at board meetings, sometimes we had long talks at the Belvárosi Café – where he was a regular. He was a relatively young man – in his early forties – and he had a surprisingly great influence on the “gerontocracy” though Kádár the boss didn’t like to include anybody under sixty in his inner circle.

Bognár was not a communist – he started his political life in the Small Holders’ Party – but left that party during the turbulent times, when Ferenc Nagy was ousted as prime-minister and was forced to emigrate, while some of his associates were imprisoned. Bognár from many years had been a non-party –man in great esteem by the regime as an economic savant. Lately he had worked out a theory which he called “new economic mechanism” and he succeeded in persuading the member of the politbureau that by introducing his “new mechanism” the Hungarian economy might be saved from the impasse it was in.

The big hall of the Belvárosi Café was full of smoke, everybody was smoking except. Bognár and myself. Outside, on Felszabadulás – square (which is now called Franciscans’ square) the figures of passersby were hardly visible in the dense fog.

Professor Bognár tried to convince me of the historic importance of his theory. He wanted to publish an essay dealing with his ideas in our magazine. We would publish it anyway, of course.. I wondered why he wanted to persuade me of the viability of the “new economic mechanism.”

“The Socialist – ideas are basically sound” – he said.” the problems are caused by rigid central planning. That must be stopped. Businesses should be allowed to make their decisions independently. Profitability should be the measure of their success – not the fulfilment of the plan dictated from above.”

It sounded as if Professor Bognár was trying to reinvent capitalism.

“What happens if the Ikarus factory which produces buses for export to the Soviet Union, goes bankrupt? I asked him.

“That can’t happen.. after all Ikarus is owned by state..” Bognár answered angrily.

My excursion into economy was postponed for a while. I returned to the past.. and to literature. I was carrying out an old plan: to write a book on one of the most contested statesmen of the 19th century: Prince Metternich. I was totally absorbed in researching the intricacies of his diplomacy as he tried to maintain a balance of power in Europe – I also investigated his correspondence on marriages and love affairs in the Vienna court – and in the meantime I didn’t care much about the troubles of the communist present. Soon however, I had to acknowledge that a silent battle was going on between the backers and the adversaries of Professor Bognár’s “new economic mechanism”. Though some goods of a better quality had appeared recently in the shops and many more blocks of flats were being constructed to alleviate the housing shortage a few daring individuals even started forming GMKs (Economic Working Collectives) which were in fact the nuclei of future business enterprises: there considerable forces opposing the “reform”. The heavy industry lobby panicked: its people were afraid of losing their privileged position and the big subsidies granted them hither

to by the state. This panic reaction was probably in the background of the tragedy of Deputy Prime Minister Péter Vályi, whom I happened to now quite well

A brilliant economist in his forties, Vályi was appointed Deputy Prime Minister with special responsibility for introducing the reform measures. Sometimes I heard from friends about his difficulties – his struggles with certain groups who were trying to slow down the reform process.

On a beautiful summer's day, Vályi was on holiday in the Bükk Mountains, and decided to visit the Diósgyőr Iron Works – about twenty miles from his hotel. His official limousine took him to the Iron Works, where the director, the party secretary and other dignitaries received the “comrade deputy minister” with due respect and with a rich breakfast – ham, sausages, cheese, fruit, and dessert. Wine was also served but Vályi did not drink any, he had a glass of orange juice instead.. After the “brindisi” a tour of the Iron Works was offered. Vályi accepted.

They walked around in the big factory. Vályi inspected everything with interest finally they arrived at the foundry.

There was casting going on, a part of the iron was cast into a cauldron – the remaining iron was led into cast iron moulds made of sand.

It must have been a terrific sight: the glowing, red iron-“serpent” running along the floor. While admiring it Vályi allegedly lost his balance and fell into the hot on.

All the dignitaries present testified that the Deputy Prime Minister stood alone, nobody touched him, evidently he made a false move which he shouldn't have made.. perhaps he fainted because of the heat, that is why he lost his balance and fell. Nonetheless, I heard people muttering that perhaps he was pushed before he fell.

The “accident” was recorded with suitable regret in the newspapers, Vályi was buried with due honors. His successor was less zealous about the “economic reform.” The heavy

industry continued to be subsidized heavily.. the national debt continued to grow in astronomic proportions.

In the meantime I was introducing my personal “economic reform.” Thanks to Prince Metternich I got some royalties from the Magvető Publishing House – and I used the money to buy a plot at Szentendre.. a little town at the Danube, some 15 miles from Budapest.

This made quite a change to my way of life: I bought books on gardening and even more useful than the books I got precious advice from Lajos and Gretl Gratzl, who sold me the plot.. and still owned a considerable part of the “Pismány” hill. First of all I planted trees: cherry trees, apricot trees, sour cherry trees, a plum tree and evoking my Mediterranean dreams, I also planted a tiny fig seedling, I was afraid that it would be killed by the first winter frost – but 10, it survived one winter, then another.. and now after thirty years, it is almost as high as the cottage which Mister Pedrány, the old stonemason built for me, on his own without any help.

From that time on I spend more and more time in my garden. I learned how to make apricot-jam and bottled sour cherries.. and also using an old pressure cooker how to make incomparably good plum brandy from the fruit which fell off my plum-tree.

Though Bognár’s economic reform more or less came to a deadlock situation, tourism was booming: sleepy, desolate Szentendre woke up on its narrow, almost Mediterranean streets tourists swarm buying pottery, glass-ware, pseudo-folk art and other objects, there are dozens of news shops and restaurants. In the oldest one, the “Golden Dragon (Arany Sárkány)” I was asked to stage a TV program for the British Channel Four with the famous chef called Anton Mosiman, probably because I became a kind of celebrity in the world of gastronomy after my book “Gastronomic adventures in Europe” became a bestseller.

Quite unexpectedly I got an invitation from the USA, from Kent State University, to give a series of lectures, on cultural history, including of course gastronomy. I accepted the

invitation – but there were difficulties in getting permission of the Hungarian authorities to spend three months in the USA. I tried to persuade the “comrades” in the Ministry for Cultural Affairs and in the Press Office of the Prime Minister’s that I did not plan to “abscond”.. why should I do go now, when I have had plenty of opportunities during my stays abroad.. but they would not relent. Ultimately Boldizsár called the “boss of bosses,” György Aczél, and he gave his consent.

When my plane landed at Kennedy in a snow storm, Professor Gerald Read was waiting for me in a fur hat. “I hope that you are prepared for the arctic cold” he greeted me with a face which boded ill.

In fact I was not prepared. The freezing cold – by the way – was measured in a way there: the Fahrenheit degrees were multiplied by the “wind factor” and as result amazing subzero temperatures were proclaimed on notice boards in entrances.

My horror increased when I was shown to my room: the central heating was not working well – and instead of windows, there was a glass wall. Immediately beyond it snow covered hills were to be seen.

The first impression however soon changed. The central heating – miraculously started working during lunch in the faculty dining room I met with guest lecturers from all parts of the world. Among them was Professor Dante (of Italian origin, but no relation to Alighieri) Sumrak, a young anthropologist with glistening black hair from Thailand, and Ileana Constantinescu, from Romania. The majority of professors with a tenure were US citizens, of course – they were the first ones to explain to me the notion of “political correctness” heretofore unknown in that part of the world where I lived. The subject was being discussed with special emphasis because of the tragedy that had happened at the campus of Kent State a few years ago when the National Guard shot at demonstrating students and several young people were injured. Of course one could not compare that tragic event with the crushing of the

Hungarian Revolution in 1956, the fusillades,, the executions, the mass imprisonment following it, but my hosts did criticize vehemently the behaviour of the National Guard and what American society did – or did not do – to prevent the clashes and to heal the wounds, caused by them. My colleagues were tactful enough not to ask me about Hungary.. they certainly knew that nothing happened there: no apologies, no indemnification, no nothing. The greatest concession of the regime was to grant an amnesty to a few hundred political prisoners after three or four years in prison.

I was supposed to lecture on cultural history – but in most cases – after a few minutes of lecturing – I was overwhelmed by questions about the communist present.

“Is there a Parliament in your country?” somebody asked “ if there is why are we told by our political scientists, that there is no parliamentary democracy there?”

I tried to explain, that the main decisions were taken by the politbureau of the Communist party. Discussions in Parliament were purely a formality.

“Are there elections” a student asked

“Yes, there are.”

“How come that the Communist Party gets the majority at the election”

“There is just one list, that of the so called Patriotic People’s Front put together by the party I answered, “the figures are manipulated if considered necessary.”

General laughter. The case of “socialist democracy” was settled. I could continue my lecture on cultural history – until another question was asked about mystery of paprika. Do Hungarians use it as a drug? I am asked. I try to explain the role of paprika in Hungarian cuisine ... and I achieve my first success in cultural history describing the route of paprika from Mexico to Spain – thanks to Doctor Chanca, physician to Columbus – then on Italian ships to Turkey.. and its introduction to Hungary by the Turks, when they occupied Hungary during the sixteenth century.

Thus I mix literature and politics, history and gastronomy during my lectures.. and before I leave I am rewarded with an honorary diploma.

In short speech I express my thanks – and my fear that I learned much more than I taught, because after fifty years this was the first time that I had the good fortune to live in a working democracy.

“I spent the first part of my life, between the two world wars, in a semi-fascist country, where the first ant-Jewish laws in Europe were introduced in 1920, then during the following decade, there was the Holocaust.. and I spent the last several years under communism.” Now I had the good fortune to experience democracy.”

“Why don’t you stay here in the US?” Professor Read asked me.

“Because I hope that Hungary will be a democracy soon” was my reply.

The delights of gastronomy

A butterfly hovers above me in the air, then flutters away towards the fig tree protruding over the armchair. I am sitting in. There it is one of those summer mornings, when the colors shine in the sunshine after a night's rain and the sound of ships' horns on the Danube at the bottom of the hill are clearly audible as if they were very close. At first I don't care much about the butterfly which is perching quietly on a branch between the big, palm-like leaves of the fig-tree.. I have my type-writer in front of me on the garden-table and I am trying to write about Greek cuisine. I went on a tip to Greece recently and the refreshing taste of tzatziki made with cucumber and garlic is still on my palate, as well as the stuffed vine leaves. Then, all of a sudden, I have to look at the butterfly. Until now it was perching quietly on branch but as I stop writing she flies near me and settles on my type-writer, looking at me a quietly. Now I am sure the little creature must be a she. I am feeling the warmth emanating from her eyes. Black and yellow are her favorite colors she wears them with a certain elegance. And she is inquisitive too. after I start writing again, she flies into the kitchen, she seems to be looking around to see whether everything is as it used to be over to the rooms where things are –as usual – in total disarray. she returns to the terrace, this time looking down from the bar which is holding the protruding roof of the terrace. She sits there for a long time. I do not know how long, because – as often happens nowadays - I fall asleep sitting in the armchair, and when I wake up, she has already gone. I had not seen her fly away.

I had never thought about metempsychoses.. but I have a curious feeling. So many millions believe in it.. maybe a transmigration of souls. I imagined that. Ágnes came back, to see me and to look around in the garden and in the house where we spent many happy hours and days together.

After my divorce – I was a kind of womanizer. I had many lovers – all of them beautiful and usually much younger than myself. Ágnes appeared in my life almost unnoticed. She was not beautiful – with her sharp nose and bony face she was unremarkable almost ugly. She was also fifteen years older than me. I did not guess that our friendship would be of more consequence than most of my love affairs.

She was a great journalist, a genius of an editor –and a sophisticated cook at that. I am ashamed to have to confess that I was first enchanted by her cuisine. I was already well versed in gastronomy of course. I always considered it an essential part of culture but my knowledge was mostly theoretical. I had not much opportunity to enjoy first hand the delights of haute cuisine. In my younger years I was accustomed to Jewish middle-class food prepared by a maid directed by my mother – then the lean years of the war followed.. and during the communist era refined gastronomy was not existing as it was considered a “luxury of the bourgeoisie”. This also meant that no books about gastronomy were published. My “Gastronomic adventures in Europe” was published almost semi-secretly by the Panorama Publishing House under the guise of a “Travel book.”

In her little flat at Árpád bridge, Ágnes introduced me into the realm of haute cuisine. She made dishes which were not made in Hungarian restaurant, during the decades of communism: carpaccions and mousses, tournedos á la Rossini and Nantes duck with orange, turkey á la Cardinal, and Spanish cocido and Italian Devilled Chicken”, Beef steak Esterházy style.. Together we looked for old cookbooks in second hand bookshops and we discovered the forgotten testimony – of the great Hungarian cuisine of the past: the cookbook of Transylvanian Princess Anna Bornemissza, the manuscript of an unpublished cookbook by the chef to 16th century Archbishop Miklós Oláh. We planned together to start a gastronomic magazine, and after persuading the director of a state-owned publishing house and a number

of communist commissars, Ágnes succeeded in launching the monthly entitled “Magyar Konyha” the only magazine on gastronomy until the communist regime ended.

Ágnes died of heart failure many years ago and while I am still sitting in my garden two other shadows appear from the past: the “two fat poets” as they called themselves. Pablo Neruda and Miguel Asturias.

Both are gourmets. Both came on the invitation of the Pen Club to taste Hungarian food and wine.. and to write poems and prose about their gastronomic adventures.

Neruda consumed too much paprikás and drunk too much – bull’s blood this is why he preferred to stay in the hotel, while I drive Asturias to the countryside in my Beetle, stepping at inns, restaurants –and also at homesteads on the puszta. A small, stout man in his sixties, with his Creole skin and Creole face, he is clearly a descendent of the Inkas.. and proud of it. While driving on the endless flatness of the puszta, Asturias talks about his ancestors.. about the mythical people, who arrived from nowhere, and organized a wonderful state in the mountains.. and after a time disappeared through some trap door of history.

“They must have known of some source of energy like atomic fusion – Asturias says – this is the only explanation for the houses they built without windows.”

He stares at me with his hypnotic look. I am prepared to believe his words.

Thanks to my trips with Asturias –and with Neruda who later joins us – I can revive my memories of regional cooking which were almost erased by the uniform dishes of the Communist catering trade.

In an romantic inn on the Hortobágy-puszta, we are eating “Steak Hortobágy style” we have “Villagers’s soup” cooked in an earthenware casserole and covered with lángos-dough in Debrecen: the next day we have Chervil soup and Carp fillets Bácska style at Baja, then pike perch stuffed with mushrooms and Strudel on Lake Balaton.

The book written by Neruda and Asturias on “Eating around Hungary” appeared a few months after their visit with my afterword. Inspired by this experience, I started writing a book about Hungarian regional cooking . It was published by Magyar Világ Publishers in three languages: English, German and Hungarian.

Time was passing by quickly. While I was getting more and more involved in the delights of gastronomy, the rule of communism was nearing its end. Young men and women were Xeroxing and distributing anti-communist leaflets and newspapers in semi-clandestinity (one of them was László Rajk junior the son of Julia Rajk, born a year after our meeting in Venice).

Senior communist politicians – frightened by an uncertain future – were fraternizing with the leaders of the opposition which was forming. A “reform communist” Miklós Németh, was named Prime Minister and proposed round table discussions to prepare for multi-party elections. Following the elections a new democratic government was formed.

I started the new era in my own way: invited by an editor, who had agreed to publish a Hungarian version of the Encyclopedia Britannica, I undertook to write entries on cultural history and gastronomy. It was exciting and thought provoking job and I was glad to do it when – quite unexpectedly – I was lucky enough to be involved in another venture which was destined to make gastronomic history.

George Lang, the American-Hungarian restaurateur had been a friend of mine since the early seventies, when he was working on his book the “Cuisine of Hungary”. We met many times while he did his research in Hungary. Now, after communism was over and the process privatizing state-owned enterprises had begun, George returned to Budapest and during an agreeable chat in the “Vienna Café” in the Forum Hotel he asked me my opinion of an eventual “privatization” of the Gundel Restaurant by him and his partner, whose name he did not wish to disclose for the time being.

I knew Gundel very well of course – I had even written about it earlier. I told George honestly that in my opinion the famous hundred-year old restaurant was in a terrible state. The elegant ambiance had deteriorated through neglect during the decades of state-ownership, some of the architectural features of the eclectic Gundel Palace had even been destroyed – for instance – the Great Dining Room became two and a half yards lower, because a false ceiling had been constructed which was of course incredibly nonsensical. Senseless and stupid similar sins had also been committed against the distinguished, aristocratic Gundel cuisine of yore.

We both had memorable childhood experiences of Gundel's past. George studied violin with Professor Dezső Rados in Budapest and his father, when he came for a business trip from Székesfehérvár to Budapest, took George to Gundel for lunch.

"We sat in the garden and were intoxicated by the surroundings: I ordered dishes from the menu I had never heard of, feeling like a timid explorer in a magic land. Although at the time I was convinced that one day I would replace Heifetz, I still had a funny yearning to belong to such a glamorous place" Lang recalled later the event in the book we wrote together a few years later, entitled "Gundel – 1894-994." I also remembered with nostalgia the family lunches which we used to have at Gundel's and I never forgot a great get-together of family and friends on Gundel's "Winter Garden," to celebrate my parents' wedding anniversary.

After the gray years of communism, I was astounded to hear about George's bold "American dream".. to renew Gundel's. I was impressed by the strategy which he worked out to win all hearts: public opinion, the Gundel family and last but not least, the good will of the State Property Agency which was the virtual owner of the restaurant at that time. First of all, he planned to write a book-sized project "Gundel – the next fifty years" in which he planned to evoke a vision of the new-old Gundel: Before flying back to New York to write the project, Lang opened an office in the Grand Hotel Ramada on Margaret Island and organized a

“skeleton team” consisting of a local attorney who – as he said – would be able to navigate the various government and city departments an architect and a secretary. He asked me whether I was willing to join the team? I was glad to accept. A series of Complicated negotiations began with the State Property Agency and ended successfully on September 21, 1991. when Gundel became the property of George Lang and his partner, Ronald S. Lauder.

While the negotiations were taking place, I was researching the details of the history of the “Gundel Dynasty.” The story had interested me for a long time because it had been an important chapter of Hungarian gastronomy and I wrote about it briefly in my “Gastronomic Adventures in Europe. The more I learned about it during my research, the more exciting it became: how Johann Gundel, the “founder of the dynasty” a thirteen year old boy, walked from his home town, Ansbach in Bavaria, to Pest in 1835 to become an apprentice waiter in the beer hall of a distant relative, how he founded a restaurant called “Blumenstöckli” – and later became the restaurateur of the posh “Archduke István”, a meeting place of the Budapest elite. His son, Károly Gundel a disciple of Cesar Ritz – took over the present restaurant in the City Park in 1912 and made it one of the most distinguished restaurants of Europe. He introduced the elegance and refinement of French haute cuisine – amalgamating them with the best traditions of Hungarian gastronomy... Now George Lang wanted to bring back Gundel’s splendor – adding the achievements of modern culinary art. While the reconstruction was going on – a “Gundel College” was organized for the staff .I was the teacher of culinary history.

In May, 1991 I went to a memorable journey, I visited Szarvas, the town on the Great Plain where I spent many happy summers during my childhood at Aunt Ilonka, Uncle Laci’s house. They were deported – as I mentioned earlier – and though they both survived the Holocaust, they soon died after they came back from Theresienstadt. After the war I never returned to Szarvas. I did not want ever to visit that place again.

Now Ronald S. Lauder invited me to accompany him on a trip to the Hungarian countryside. I knew that he and Geroge were planning to buy vineyards in order that the “new-old” Gundel should have its own wines, but as I soon found out that we did not drive to Tokaj or Eger where they bought vineyards. Ronald’s elegant, black limousine headed towards East. We crossed the Tisza river.. and after two and half hours we arrived at Szarvas.

As we were driving through the streets of the town Szarvas seemed to prosper: there were a great many new modern houses. Fifty years ago there were herds of cows on the streets returning from pasture in clouds of dust - now there were cars driving by. Students were swarming around the Agricultural High School building – even the *chateau* of the Barons Bolzsa stood there unchanged on the shore of the Körös River.

Ronald, a tall, jovial man in his early thirties had a dream concerning Szarvas. He probably knew of my attachment to the town and this is why invited me to be present at the fulfillment of his dream.

It was not the first time that Ronald S. Lauder had used some of his fortune for good deeds. He is businessman, a diplomat, an art collector and a philanthropist as well. This time he decided to lay the foundations of an International Camp for young Jews.

As we left the car we were greeted by young people from all parts of Eastern Europe. There were teenagers and young adults in their early twenties, coming from Poland and Slovakia, Russia and Romania, Hungary and Bulgaria coming together for a period of a few weeks, or a month in the International Youth Camp built in the beautiful park-like, surroundings of the banks of the Körös river.

“They are the descendents of the survivors of the Holocaust of Eastern European countries – Ronald told me – “I want these young people to regain their identity and to prepare for a wholesome future in their homelands, or in Israel or wherever they want.”

There were already various courses on in the camps buildings basketball and volleyball were being played on the courts.. some boys and girly were getting ready for trip on the Körös river.

“It is evident that it would be impossible to erase the traces of a tragic past from the souls of the older generation, but we are beginning to give these young people a good new start” Ronald said. A few years later continuing his project, he founded the Lauder Jawne School in Budapest – the “érettségi” – (school leaving certificate) – of this shove is now accepted by universities all over the world.

Inspired by this memorable experience, I stepped up my researches on Theodor Herzl's life and work. I had started this earlier, following a visit to the Herzl Museum and Archives in Jerusalem, where I discovered some letters and notes from Herzl's youth. The founder of Zionism – as is well known – was born in 1860 in Hungary's capital city in a house near the Great Synagogue. He attended the Lutheran (evangélikus) “gimnázium” – a liberal secondary school – where later some of Hungary's Nobel laureates – Eugene Wigner and Leo Szilárd among them – were students. Herzl started his career as a journalist in Budapest – writing articles of the German-language “Pester Journal”.. and though the Herzl family later settled in Vienna, he remained in constant touch with his friends in Budapest until the end of his life. One of my interesting discoveries was his correspondence with Arminius Vambéry, the noted Hungarian orientalist – a friend of Sultan Abdul Hamid – who introduced Herzl to the Ottoman ruler and supported Herzl's memorable journey to Palestine.

I accompanied Herzl on his journeys in my mind: to Paris, where he was present in the court room during the trials of Alfred Dreyfus and after the verdict he attended his degradation and expulsion from the ranks of the army. To his travels to Turkey, to Palestine to the first Zionist Conferences in Switzerland.

It was one of the greatest experiences of my life to be a witness to the gradual transformation of a sophisticated non-believer into a.. I would be bold as to say dare I say a prophet? Or did he arrive at his historic conclusions just by logical thinking, not by some mystical revelation?

My book entitled “Herzl” was published in 1995. After its publication and I continued my agreeable “private counselorship” to Gundel’s.

In the meantime, George Lang had a brilliant idea: a few hundred yards from the Gundel Place there was a cottage built in Transylvanian style used as a warehouse during the times of the state ownership. Now George decided to start a “cuccina mamma” type restaurant there, with women cooks and waitresses.. men were allowed in only as guests. He also thought there should be good middle-class Hungarian cuisine from the past.. even the beverages should evoke the “golden age” of Budapest, the turn of the century, there would be soda-water in old fashioned siphons, and besides the wines the traditional “spritzer” – a mix of soda water. Old furniture was bought, engravings evoking scenes of 19th century Budapest life were hung on the walls – and Bagolyvár (Owl’s Castle) restaurant was opened – to instant success.

I had an idea, too: when George Lang suggested that we should start a “Wine Society” – I suggested that it should be named after the Princess on whose estate Tokaji Aszu was first produced. This way “The Susanna Lorántffy Wine Society” was founded.

The production of quality wines was badly neglected during the communist era, and the Susanna Lorántffy Wine Society which aimed to promote quality Hungarian wines, had a difficult start. During the subsequent years however, highly qualified Hungarian wine makers appeared on the scene.. also Gundel started to produce wines on its newly acquired Tokaj and Eger estates. The emerging wine makers presented their wines accompanied by creations of

Gundel's chef, Kálmán Kalla. It has become fashionable to wine and dine with Princess Susanna in Gundel's Tavern.

During the years to come – I published a number of books, contributed to magazines in Hungary and abroad.. perhaps this is why my old friend, Egon Rónay – the publisher of the famous Rónay Guides in Great Britain and one of the founders of the Academy of Gastronomy – suggested to his co-academicians that they invite me to their Madrid conference in '996.

Juan Carlos King of Spain, attended the dinner arranged in a magnificent room of "Madrid Casino" at the end of the conference. Sitting opposite His Majesty at the main table, I had a feeling of satisfaction – as I remembered my forebears who were forced to leave Spain five centuries before.

King Solomon's mines

We were touring Israel: Géza, Béla and I. We were enjoying the trip – and we did not want to evoke the misery we had to endure together fifty years before. We were wandering among the relics of six thousand years and the miracles of the present from Jerusalem to Qumran and from Tel Aviv to the Red Sea.

Since we had been in the forced labor camp on the Eastern front, Géza had become George and a citizen of the United States. Béla was now called Dov a respected citizen of Nahariya in Israel. I was the only one who had not changed either my name or my citizenship.. and had remained in Hungary.

Géza had had a very American carrier. After he arrived as a refugee in New York he employed worked as a waiter in a boarding house on Shaker Heights.

“Unexperienced as I was – he recalled – “I poured the meat broth in a guest’s lap a bald, paunchy businessman. Instead of cursing, he looked at me compassionately and said: “This is not an adequate job for you.. come and see me in my office next week. He gave me his card.. and I went to see him on my first day off.”

It was an unpleasant surprise for George, that when he visited him in his New York office he did not offer him a job, he just handed him over dozens of wrist-watches. “Go and sell them to the shopkeepers on East street” he told George. He added that he would get twenty-five percent commission on the sale of the watches.

The next day George, clad in his only good suit, which was made of dark blue thick woolen material stood sweating on the crossing of Fifth Avenue and East 49th Street and was at a loss as to how and where start his new career as a salesman.

There were many shops selling watches and jewellery in that street.. finally George decided to go into one of them.

An old man was inside. After greeting him politely he realized that George, was not a customer, he just waved, with his hand indicating that he was fed up with salesman.

“As I almost fainted with shame and anger” George said “the old man approached me and looked at me carefully.” What is the matter with you young man? Are you ill?” he asked.

George tried to explain to him in his broken English – mixed with Yiddish words – where he came from.. and added that this was his first attempt at selling.

“Poor man” the shopkeeper said compassionately “I changed my mind, I shall buy you watches.. Not all of them, he hastened to add.. maybe a dozen.”

“After this deal I went to the next shop then to another.. and finally I sold all the watches” George said. Two years later I already had my own firm, another two years later it occurred to me that perhaps I should not buy watches from the New York wholesalers who imported their goods from Hong Kong – but eventually I might do so myself. Everybody told me that it would be difficult to find a firm in Hong Kong which would be willing to sell to me directly.. nonetheless I took a flight to Hongkong . From my hotel room I immediately discovered that about sixteen pages of the telephone directory contained addresses and phone numbers of firms producing and exporting watches. I contacted some of them, we made a few deal and soon I started importing watches from Hongkong, and selling them to my customers. This way I was getting a much larger profit than before. During the following years my enterprise grew and bloomed I acquired important customers like Walmarkt and when I was sixty five, I could afford to hand over the management of my enterprise to one of my sons in law. Now we enjoy life with my wife from spring to autumn in our home at Clifford Park, opposite Manhattan – and from autumn to spring in our other home in Florida.

Béla’s life story was quite different. After he returned from the Mauthausen concentration camp, he and his wife, who had survived the holocaust in the Budapest ghetto, decided to leave Hungary with an aliya. After hazardous journey they arrived in Israel just in

time to take part in the war which started after the 1948 UNO resolution as the Arab armies attacked the new state of Israel. While driving among the hills of Galliele, Dov showed us the remnants of a "fortress" built of earth and of rocks – where he stood guard with an old English rifle on his shoulder, expecting the attack which fortunately did not happen because the Arab offensive was stopped by the Israel Army far from that place.

During the following year Dov lived with his family in a tent. It was a great improvement when they were given a big crate, used originally to transport furniture on a ship and they made a kind of a hut out of it. As the years went by, life in the kibbutz of which they were members, improved.

Nonetheless Dov left after six years the kibbutz and started. We went to see it: it was a modest – sized shop selling all sorts of cameras and films, there was also a laboratory with an assistant – who came from Poland – was developing films and making copies. It must have been a lucrative business because Dov went on trips all over the world with his wife and had had a bigish villa built nearby. The pride of his life was however neither the villa nor the shop, but the little museum he helped to establish. Interesting archeological finds of pre-Roman and Roman Times were discovered at Nahariya and it was Dov's idea to have a museum built to preserve them. He donated money, did a postgraduate course in archeology (he already had a doctorate from Budapest University).. and three years later he became director of the museum. He also wrote and published his memoirs.. which besides his personal story also contains a history of Nahariya town. He gave me a copy of the book – I could only enjoy the photos of places and friends because the text was in Ivrit.. and I am ashamed to say that I do not understand the language.

Dov wrote the book in the kibbutz. After the death of his wife he handed over his shop to his son and he returned to the kibbutz, where he had his old friends, his library.. and time and peace to meditate and to write.

Now it was my turn to talk about the events of my life which George and Doe did not know of. I related how I was dramatically sacked from my job during the Stalinist era: a “workers’ meeting” was held during which I was declared traitor of the working class“ and had to return my press card to the party secretary and to leave the stage midst whistles and boos.. I spoke about my expecting the “black car” which would take me to prison.. and how – instead of being imprisoned – I was asked to make translations for the foreign ministry.. Also I spoke of a crisis which happened to me during the times of “goulash communism”: Sylvia my daughter did not return from a trip to Switzerland – she “absconded” as it was called then – and as was customary, I was denied an “exit visa” in my passport. The “Budapest exhibition” which was my brainchild was to be shown in Paris and I was asked by the Municipal Council to introduce it to the press and public there. As it happened, Iván Boldizsár, who was –as I mentioned earlier – Member of Parliament, Chairman of the Hungarian Pen Club and editor of The New Hungarian Quarterly, of which I was deputy editor – was ready to sign a solemn declaration in which he stated that “though he knew that my daughter had absconded he took full responsibility – if I was granted an exit visa – for my due return from Paris.” He signed it and I returned to Hungary, which was called a “socialist democracy” by its rulers at that time.

It would be naïve optimism to suppose that the collapse of communism the introduction of elections, and parliamentary government could have eradicated all the vestiges of forty years of communist rule or could have transform Hungary into a modern, democratic society at once. This was impossible of course. The parties were not just opponents of each other as in a “grown up” democracy: they often considered the others as enemies, they were not aware of the possibility that roles may change after the next election. “Otherness” is not tolerated well: though the gypsies constitute an important part of the population – there are about 800.000 gypsies in a country with a population of about ten million –they are not given

enough support to emerge from abject poverty. In many parts of the country racial hatred prevails and despairing gypsy families have left the country seeking asylum in Toronto and in Strasburg. It was probably an overstatement to say that they left Hungary because of political persecution. But the only possible way to solve the “gypsy question” is not deny their claim – but introduction of “positive discrimination” which might promote the education of the young and the development of a gypsy middle class in Hungary.

Nonetheless the first time in my life I feel that nowadays I am living in a free country. I can travel whenever I want (if I have the money to pay for it) I can write whatever book I wish (if I there is a publisher willing to publish it), I can vote for whichever party I want when there are elections. And yet, and yet..

“What does this sigh mean: “George asked.

“It means that I am too old.. all these developments came about too late.”

“How do you mean? “ Dov asked.

“During the long period of communist rule, Hungarian society was never confronted with the terrible atrocities of the Holocaust.. while in the Western World it became common knowledge, thanks to books and documentaries, literary works and public apologies. This did not happen either in Hungary or in Eastern Germany, or in the other Eastern European countries under soviet rule. It may take decades.. perhaps the lifetime of a generation for the people in these countries to see the light.

We were sitting on the on the Red Sea, many thousand miles from the country we were talking about. King Solomon’s mines were there, in front of us. Amongst the reddish rocks glittering in the sunshine rocks dark shadows marked the entrances of the caves, where gold ore was mined in King Solomon’s times.

The mines reminded us of a quarry, where the rocks were gray and the sun was not shining – because it was November and cold rain was drizzling from the clouds. It was the

Fertőrákos Quarry on Hungary's western border where the slave laborers worked – starving, from time to time hit by the guards.. until those who survived, were forced to march on, towards the Mauthausen concentration camp.

Our dead friends came to life in our imagination: ever-smiling Kuka with his comic-strip face, in his blue overall: fat Schönmann who played poker passionately and always lost.. Dini, who saved my life on more than occasion ..Rose, the composer, who might have become a new Gustav Mahler, had he not died at the front.. Rodolpho, the magician, who tricked fate, survived and became a valiant successor to Houdini.. Pista Sándor, the actor who went over to the Russians.. only to die a in prison camp. Ghosts of old comrades were swarming around us.. when all of a sudden we stopped discussing the past, because a group of young people appeared on the coast –they were going to windsurf on the sea.

“For them for these lads our tales are probably tall stories, history, which hopefully will never be repeat”. George mused:

“But it should never be forgotten” Dov said.

“.. This is what the Sovereign Lord Jehovah has said: In the day of my cleansing you from ally your errors, I will also cause the cities to be inhabited, and the devastated places must be rebuilt. And the desolated land will be cultivated.. and people will certainly say: “That land yonder which was laid desolate has become like the garden of Eden, and the cities that were torn down are fortified.. And the nations that will be remaining round about you will have to know that I, myself Jehovah, have built the things torn down. I have planted what has been laid desolate.”

(Ezekiel, 36,33,34.)

